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MISS NANCY STOCKER.

MISS NANCY STOCKER.

A Novel.

BY

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AUTHOR OF "PERSONAL RECOLLECTION OF PETER STONNOR, ESQ."
"DUCIE DIAMONDS," ETC. ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON: CHAPMAN AND HALL
LIMITED
1887

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WESTMINSTER:
PRINTED BY NICHOLS AND SONS,
25, PARLIAMENT STREET.

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stockings, my dear, and a match for any man," she would say, with a sharp jerk of her head; but there was a big bouncing heart in that sprightly little body, big and warm enough to have brought a joy and a comfort into Flowton, and to startle that deadly-lively place into healthy vitality. Why, the very sight of her face as she trotted through the village, a face ruddy as a ripe Ribston, framed in iron-grey curls and surmounted by a bonnet of marvellous build and proportion, was as good as a breath of fresh air. It set the blood coursing through your veins and put you in good humour with the world.

Plenty of friends had Miss Nancy, and plenty of family secrets in her keeping. Many a home had she sweetened by bundling a musty skeleton neck and crop out of its cupboard and many an old standing feud had she healed.

"Two penn'orth of common sense and a little pluck will carry you through the world," said she, and it certainly had carried the little lady through half the capitals of Europe with abundant success.

She and her father, Sir Richard Stocker, had scoured the Continent together. He was in the F. O., liable at any moment to be shot off to the back of nowhere on some political mission. Where he went she went. No matter how short the notice, no matter what discomfort had to be braved, there she was "ready, aye ready!" and not only ready but able to give a word or two of wise advice if needed.

She had a way of her own in getting over diplomatic difficulties; indeed, Sir Richard declared that the F. O. would have gone to the wall without her. She was a recognised power. She had a tongue sharp enough to give and take with the best of them, and a

perennial good humour that was more than a match for the keenest wit.

Long will her sprightly figure, her blunt speech, and cheery high-pitched voice be remembered at Vienna, and the way she there discomfited old Soublieff and that arch intriguer's naïve excuse when chaffed into self-defence "*Mais la petite diablesse disait la vérité!*" is a standing joke at the Embassy to this very day.

At her father's death she came to Flowton. What specially brought her there will be seen by-and-by. Hither she had come though, bringing with her all her worldly goods.

Sir Richard had a very pretty taste and an uncommon good eye for a bargain, and, as he invariably made the most of his opportunities, there arose in consequence a goodly store of cabinets, couches, chairs, pictures,

and ornaments, with china and nick-nackerie enough to stock a shop.

"But what's the use of an acre of bed-clothes between four posts, or an oak cabinet big enough to play hide-and-seek in, to a dot like me?" said Miss Nancy.

So she did a wise thing—she weeded. She gave the big things away to her big friends, and kept the small; the result, a little nest so cosy and so beautiful that it at once became the talk of the place. Like herself, every thing in it, from the old worked sampler on the wall to the spindle-legged piano in the corner, was small and precious, the very smallness and apparent insignificance of the collection being seemingly held as sufficient excuse for her friends to indulge in the occasional luxury of breaking the tenth commandment.

There was one ornament, however, that escaped inquisitive eyes. A poor thing!—

only her father's red coat, hunting-crop, and spurs, which hung up as a trophy in the hall —but humble as it was Miss Nancy prized it above all her other ornaments put together.

He had been more like a brother than a father; so close and active too had been their companionship that she never could think of the dashing, handsome Sir Richard as old; and now that he was gone she hoarded every scrap of personal remembrance, and kept up his old customs with the regularity of an almanac.

The Queen's birthday was as religiously observed as it had been of yore. Ever since she had been at Flowton the day had been marked by a quiet little dinner—not an ordinary affair, mind you, of a sodden joint, with a cabinet pudding to follow, but a recherché repast dainty enough to satisfy wicked old Brillat himself. She gave her mind to it; and, thoroughly believing in that wholesome

adage, if you want a thing done properly do it yourself, could, at a pinch, slip on white sleeves and apron, whip down a certain silver saucepan that hung like a chief among the baser pots and pans over the kitchen-dresser, and concoct you a dish dainty enough to be set before a king.

Behold the little lady then, on a certain 24th of May, busily engaged in stewing some pigeons in this same magic utensil. The process was nearly completed, the forcemeat balls had been added, also the half-glass of Madeira, the large hand of the clock pointed to twenty minutes from the dinner-hour, when there was a loud rat-tat-tat at the front door.

"Who in all the world is that!" exclaimed parlour-maid Jessie, with a rapid glance at the clock.

"The clock won't tell you," said her mistress, sharply.

Off went Jessie, and presently returned. "Mr. Cyril Camelford, ma'am."

"Drat the man!" says Miss Nancy. "I believe he has come to dinner!" And with this she hurried off into the drawing-room, sleeves, apron, silver saucepan, and all.

"Now, Cyril!" she began, shaking the ladle at him, "you've come to dinner, and dinner you can't have here to day, and that's plain! Look at my room! Don't you know your big uncle is coming?"

"I can squeeze very small" he pleaded.

"You'll upset my table I tell you! Five instead of four, I won't have it! I hate odd numbers.

"Not five! The mystical five! The Greek diapente! There is luck under the five, Miss Nancy; besides, would you drive a hungry man away after inhaling these culinary odours? Would you add this last pang to his misery?"

"Hm! What is it now? Dyspepsia or despair?"

"A soupçon of both delicately blended like this æthereal sauce that is regaling my nose! How can a man be well in London? Your friends feast you and your doctor diets you. Everything you eat disagrees, and if it didn't you couldn't write savage verse. So there you go see-saw through life!"

"You're a bigger fool than ever, Cyril! What d'ye mean by dillytantying away your time like this? For heaven's sake man, stir up! Get an object! Get——"

"Don't kill me outright"! he cried in mock horror, "object? Fancy being hampered with an object! Ah! if I had but your energy, your unquenchable vitality, your unflagging spirits! your——"

"Tantarra! Tantarra! Tantarra!" sang out the little lady, playing an impromptu

accompaniment with the saucepan and ladle. "Moralizing ten minutes before dinner-time! None of that if you please! Stop and dine if you can put up with a low-legged chair, high ones all engaged. Ah, yes! by the way, stop and taste the Port and see that your uncle and Mr. Pinnock don't come to fisticuffs."

"Pinnock coming?"

"Yes. Didn't you know? Coming to taste the Port. He is to have a share and shan't be left out in the cold. He is not quite superfine enough for your grand-uncle, but he's not a sham."

"I wish I wasn't!" Cyril burst out. "I'm a pure and unadulterated sham! I'm a snob compared to your lively Pinnock."

"No, Cyril," said she, "you're only a fool, and you'll get over that! Now take your coat off and make yourself comfortable while I beautify."

He followed her into the hall, deposited his hat and coat, and returned to the drawing-room. Here, after inspecting the little treasures, he quiesced into an easy chair with the air of a man who is provided with a fitting back-ground.

No one could ever tell Cyril Camelford's age. He had been ever so long in the London literary world, and had lately become fashionable by a fluke. His skit written in imitation of the Intense School of Poetry had been received in sober earnest. It was too good! So he woke up one fine morning to find himself famous. He caught the chance too, and forthwith permanently adopted the mummer's mantle that had sent him such good luck. Before he had written this skit he had described æstheticism as one of the epidemics of modern society, and perhaps he suffered a little from having taken the disease rather late in life. He was a general

favourite though, and Mr. Pinnock the lawyer, who was the first to arrive, greeted him heartily.

Mr. Pinnock was past the middle age—with a knowing smile about the corners of his mouth—small eyes—and bushy whiskers that took on strange and terrifying movements when he laughed.

He was soon followed by Mr. and Mrs. Camelford of the Laurels. She a doll-like beauty with that sort of complexion and hair that defies time, and shows no change between seventeen and seventy. Indeed as she came in under the shadow of her big husband, she looked every bit as young as either of her grown-up daughters. As for her husband, he simply eclipsed everybody and everything by the tremendous expanse of his white waistcoat and shirt. He took Miss Stocker in to dinner, Mr. Pinnock following with Mrs. Camelford, and Cyril pensively

bringing up the rear with his hands behind his back.

For a time Mr. Camelford awed them into silence, but good cheer soon tells, and it must be a frigid heart that would not warm under Miss Nancy's fare, backed as it was by her happy-go-lucky quip and joke and droll little laugh.

She rattled on about the stewed pigeons, and then how Judy the cook roasted the spring chicken by a separate wood fire, with one eye on the spit and another on the clock. In short she made the culinary art so vastly entertaining that tongues were set a wagging, and by the time the famous Champfleury asparagus appeared Mr. Camelford had thawed enough to ask Mr. Pinnock to keep up the old custom, and take wine with him. This done, however, they immediately plunged into the other old custom and commenced differing, bickering, and

crowing over local gossip, to the mute terror of Mrs. Camelford, and the covert delight of Mr. Cyril.

"So they have found a tenant for the Champfleury shootings?" Mr. Camelford began urbanely, by way of humouring the lawyer's sporting proclivities.

"Queer sort of customer too!" rejoined Mr. Pinnock, "to take a place without looking at it! Not my way anyhow!"

"Well, whoever he may be, we will hope he is respectable. We certainly don't want Tom, Dick, and Harry from Billingsgate, flourishing their breach-loaders about here."

"For the matter of that," said Mr. Pinnock, "I don't see that it makes much difference who he is if he pays his shot. The shootings would have been let long enough ago if there had been a lodge. As they are they would have suited me to a T."

"You!" cried Mr. Camelford, opening his eyes.

"Yes, me, John Pinnock, why not? But there, the Falshawes always behaved bad to me and mine."

"I don't think my friend Falshawe was in the habit of behaving badly to anybody," said Mr. Camelford, with a sharp stress on the friend. "You could not have known much about him ——"

"Well, seeing that my father was their lawyer I must have known *something*. Falshawe behaved badly, threw us over at election time. We were the wrong colour."

"Richard Falshawe was not the person to be influenced by party feelings ——"

"Ah! perhaps you are a Conservative?" the lawyer asked with rasping sarcasm.

"Good heavens, sir! you'll be asking if I am a Christian next!"

"Order, gentlemen! order!" cried Miss

Nancy, good-humouredly. "You know the rule: No politics on the Queen's birthday!"

"Quite right, Miss Stocker! Quite right!" said Mr. Camelford. "We apologise; besides, there is plenty else to talk about, the air is full of mysteries; not only is this strange gunner coming here to shoot, but a new doctor is coming to fill poor Ford's place while he is away. Then some mysterious person has sent the old doctor fifty pounds for his holiday trip."

"Do good by stealth, et cætera, et cætera, Camelford," observed the lawyer with a sly wink at Miss Nancy.

"No! no!" rejoined Mr. Camelford, hastily, with a deprecatory gesture that was meant to convey certain possibilities. "I tell you plainly and honestly, Mr. Pinnock, it was not sent by me! I saw that ne'er-do-well son of his, Tom, coming out of the post-office this morning. He told me he did not know

who had sent it. I then went in and questioned Miss Brice; she assumes it has been sent by an old patient."

"What about the new doctor?" Miss Nancy asked quickly.

"Ah! I can tell you a little about him. To begin with, he is rich, rich enough to have taken the large furnished house opposite the Laurels."

"I don't see much in that," Mr. Pinnock remarked. "Common thing for young doctors to take a big house for their mad patients."

"Let us hope, sir," replied Mr. Camelford, "that this gentleman will have a better idea of the fitness of things than to run the risk of offending his best patients by bringing lunatics about the place."

"Just wait a bit," said the lawyer nodding his head complacently. "There'll be a fine howling and clanking of chains by-and-by!

Oh! you'll have a lively time of it up in your fashionable quarter before long, I'll be bound."

"That joke might do at Winford, Mr. Pinnock, but it won't do here. It is out of place. But now I come to the most extraordinary part of my news. *His name is Torrance!*"

"Surely not one of *the* Torrances?" Miss Stocker asked sharply.

"Well, Crillick could not tell me about that, neither could Miss Brice, but if he is——"

"If he is!" Mr. Pinnock put in quickly, pursing out his whiskers, "it will wake up the lady at Champfleury and no mistake!"

"Too much is made of that affair," said Mr. Camelford; "it is a story that has grown and grown by vulgar tittle-tattle."

"Tittle-tattle or not," the lawyer retorted, "everybody knows that a Torrance ought to be at Champfleury. Bless me! why my

father made the two wills—and Miss Stocker herself knew old Madame Torrance."

Now, if there was one thing that Miss Nancy Stocker hated more than another, it was a discussion about Champfleury—and to have the tender subject dragged through the vulgar mire at her own table was a considerable trial to her temper. For a moment she wished she was not playing hostess, so that she might give these two belligerents a bit of her mind. All she could say was, "We won't discuss Champfleury! It is a bone that gets bigger instead of smaller from being gnawed at. A crazy woman chose to make a crazy will, and there's an end of it."

"Well, well!" said Mr. Camelford, "I know, I am quite aware in fact, that, well, that I am treading on tender ground, but this much I am forced to say, now we are on the subject. I think Mrs. Falshawe is wrong in shutting herself up as she does. In such a

very important matter, too, as the letting of the shootings, I think she could have consulted *me*, her husband's closest friend. It is monstrous that I should hear of this first from Crillick the druggist! monstrous I say! It gives me great pain to see things going on as they are up there, Miss Stocker. It is, well, it is, hugger-mugger. Kate running wild too! Why the other day she actually drove up to the Laurels in a common tax-cart with a nondescript, masculine-looking cap on her head, and offered to drive me over to the Burgoynes. I am afraid they encourage her! This very morning too, before we had done breakfast, she burst in upon us and wanted the girls to join in getting up a paper-chase—a paper-chase of all things in the world! And when I objected on the score of delicacy, for upon my word I don't think it is quite the thing for young ladies to make hares and foxes of themselves, she coolly told

me I could be one of the hounds! Now with all due deference to you, Miss Stocker, I ——"

"Now, now!" cried Miss Nancy, putting up a warning finger, "not a single syllable against Kate!"

"Oh, I know the romantic attachment between you! It does you credit. I, too, have a natural affection for the daughter of my old friend; but when I see ——"

"Take some more asparagus, Mr. Camelford, and never mind about Kate. She is all right."

"So says Cyril," he observed, meaningly, as he helped himself.

"What are you saying about me?" asked that gentleman, laying down his knife and fork.

"We were speaking about Miss Kate Falshawe," replied his uncle.

"Ah! she is one of the right sort if you like," said Mr. Pinnock, aside to Miss Stocker.

"She is intensely human," said Cyril musingly. Then, knowing by the pause that something more was expected of him, he added, "in every feature there lurks a profound potentiality."

"That's a rum way to speak of a 'ealthy young girl," exclaimed Mr. Pinnock, whose h's often lapsed under excitement.

"Upon my word, Mr. Pinnock, one would think you were speaking of a horse," said Mr. Camelford with marked aspiration.

"'Orse or no 'orse," returned the lawyer, "plain English is better than gibberish."

"You're right, Mr. Pinnock," sang out Cyril, "let me take a glass of wine with you."

"He doesn't understand! how could he?" murmured Mr. Camelford.

"You'll understand my salad," said Miss Stocker gaily; "none of your mayonnaise messes, but a simple honest salad. There

is as much difference between the two, Cyril, as between prose and poetry."

"Or rather, between the richly flavoured sonnet and the simple lyric," he rejoined.

"Your help for the simple lyric then," said she.

So they set to work. Cyril dried the freshly gathered lettuce. Miss Nancy mixed the dressing, and after the salad had been eaten with plovers' eggs, the Port was introduced.

Now the importation of a pipe of Port to be divided among a select few at Flowton was an institution as old as the hills. It began at Champfleury years and years ago, and to this day is called Torrance's Port. Mr. Camelford sipped and sipped, leaning back in his chair, and eyeing his glass in such close proximity to his white waistcoat that his wife shuddered.

"What d'ye think of it?" he said to Mr. Pinnock.

The lawyer made short work of his. One gulp and the glass was returned empty to the table with the single word "nutty!"

Mr. Camelford exalted his eyebrows in mute horror, and turned interrogatively to Cyril.

"Strong and potent enough," said his nephew, "to turn the world topsy-turvey! I verily believe this is a Thessalian philter, that will drive us all to deeds of devilry and darkness."

"Too young!" said Mr. Pinnock, tasting again.

"If anything is wrong with it," observed Mr. Camelford, "it comes from having been bottled in Winford. You can't be too careful with Port. Dirt is fatal!"

He always had a hit at commercial Winford, and Mr. Pinnock, having been bred and born there, as a matter of duty stuck up for it. They quarreled over this, and they quar-

reled over everything. Unlike the oil and vinegar in their good hostess's salad-dressing, they could not blend for one moment.

Miss Nancy was in despair! They were sparring when she left the room with Mrs. Camelford, and, but for Cyril and the beneficent influence of another bottle of Port, would have carried their warfare into the drawing-room. Luckily they appeared during a lull; and after Miss Nancy had sat down to the spindle-legged piano, and played "Napoleon's Favourite" (the very tune with which Josephine was wont to soothe her Emperor), Mr. Camelford felt so much at peace with the world that he declared he would sing. "Yes, Laura, my love," he said to his wife, "we will sing 'The Manly Heart' as usual;" and, in spite of Mr. Pinnock's audible "Don't!" the duet was sung.

His bass was tremendous. There were two powerful notes, which appeared to have

been fostered at the expense of the rest, and these were dragged in and dwelt upon, to the utter discomfiture of time and tune. He stuck out what some persons euphemistically term their chests, and rolled out these two famous notes, till the poor treble was drowned, and the china jingled to the verge of cracking. The worst of it was, too, that when it was over there was the incorrigible lawyer in a fit of uncontrollable laughter. This was too much! Mr. Camelford was silenced for the rest of the evening.

"An offensive snob, Cyril!" he jerked out when they were waiting for Mrs. Camelford in the hall. "Did you hear what he said about Kate?"

"I was a deal worse than he," said Cyril; "I'm ashamed of it. I shall walk home and try to forget it!"

"He positively has made my head ache! No, my dear Laura, it is not the Port! It is

a fine fruity wine suffering a little from being bottled in Winford. That's all! How could I have sung if the wine had disagreed?" he asked as they drove off. "Of course I am no judge, but it struck me my voice was never better?"

"Never dear! never!"

"The notes appeared to me to be even fuller and rounder?"

"Far fuller! far rounder, dear!"

"Then what does the snob mean by sitting down like a pig and saying 'Don't'?"

"Never mind him, dear!"

And, while the gentle lady was cooing and comforting her husband into a good humour, Miss Nancy Stocker sat in a brown study, pondering over what she had heard, and feeling vague alarms about her friends at Champfleury.

CHAPTER II.

CHAMPFLEURY.

Mrs. Falshawe, of whom so much had been said at Miss Stocker's inharmonious little dinner, came from Scotland. Her father, Davie Rowan, was factor in Gordon Grant's estate at Cruvie, near Aberdeen, where Sir Richard used to run down and shoot whenever he had the chance, and where Miss Nancy declared she had killed a salmon in the pools as big as herself.

Old Davie died suddenly during their last visit there, and Sir Richard immediately set about doing something for the two handsome daughters. He had always been fond of the old man, scarce a day passed but he went up to the square grey house on the hill to have a crack with the factor, and to hear from his lips how everything wanted "sorting."

The youngest daughter, Miss Jenny, soon provided for herself by marrying the well-to-do young minister at Cruvie; and the eldest, Marian, through Miss Nancy Stocker's recommendation, went as companion to old Madam Torrance at Champfleury. Now many a one had tried this before and failed; glad, after a week or so, to shake the Champfleury dust off their feet, and get as far as they could from madam's vixenish ways.

From all that has been handed down there can be little doubt that the old lady was not quite in her right mind, but, though she

screamed till she was blue in the face, and shook her crooked stick at Marian as she had at her predecessors, this young lady bowed unruffled to the storm and soon became indispensable at Champfleury.

Madam had two sons, but could leave the estate as she pleased. The eldest, Paul, she hated because he was a cripple. He had independent means, lived at Brixton, and affected the theatrical world.

She hated him for this, too. He was the first born 'tis true, but that was a "tabula rasa." He was blotted out; and his name never even mentioned at Champfleury.

Harry, the youngest, notwithstanding his careless rollicking life, was looked upon as the heir. He was for ever in his mother's black books, though; and she kept a perpetual rod over him in the person of his cousin, Dick Falshawe.

She even went to the length of having two

wills prepared—labelling them Dick and Harry, and these, when occasion required, she would flourish menacingly before his eyes; pointing her skinny finger at the names, and reminding him that she could sign which she pleased.

No one much heeded this though, for Mr. Richard Falshawe was among the flock of half-black sheep who crowd to race-meetings and steeple-chases, and live mysteriously on nothing.

Marian became the judicious bottle-holder; she soothed little irritations, summoned Dick or Harry as the case required, and generally managed to pour oil on the troubled waters. Then madam's sight began to fail, and to complicate matters Dick must needs fall head over ears in love with the buxom Scotch lass. Knowing them both so well, this little flirtation afforded madam the greatest possible amusement.

She winked and laughed when she heard that Dick had gone to shoot in Scotland while Marian happened to be spending her holiday there. She chuckled to herself at the idea of these two knowing ones getting entangled, and behaving like a boy and girl; and at times, when she caught Marian blushing and Dick looking foolish, her endeavours to restrain her hilarity were positively alarming. Capital fun for her! but when it oozed out that Harry had been ever so long married to a sickly wife whom she had never seen or heard of, and that there was already another prospective heir to Champfleury in the shape of a grown-up bouncing boy, her anger burst out like a thunder-plump. She raged like the mad woman she was. Never was such a row! She summoned him to Champfleury, pulled the two wills from under her pillow and beat them about her head like a pair of cymbals; shrieking out her male-

dictions, and threatening to cut him off with a shilling.

The deed was done, though, and could not be undone. She would neither see the wife nor the child; and so angry was she that in all probability she would have made good her threat had not his old flame, Lady Constance Chomleigh, fought his battles.

Her ladyship and madam were great cronies, notwithstanding the disparity of their ages. Lady Conny was the one link that bound madam to her former world. She paid regular visits to Champfleury and retailed the latest scandals through madam's silver ear-trumpet, dropping a good word for Henry when she could, and a bad one for Marian, whom she instinctively regarded as a dangerous enemy.

She hated this stuck-up companion, who had the audacity to gather up her skirts and march proudly out of the room whenever the

silver ear-trumpet was produced. So month after month matters went on till madam came up to London to have her eyes operated on. Marian's health had broken down, and while she went away for an extra long holiday madam was looked after by Miss Nancy Stocker.

The old lady went back worse than she came, and got more and more cunning the blinder she grew. Wonderful were the devices she adopted to hide the loss of her sight.

Articles had their private marks, and were kept in certain places, so as to be easily found. The light was altered so as to suit the particular time of day. And the two wills, Dick and Harry, privately marked, still slept under her pillow.

Marian had quietly resumed her duties. She read and wrote, as the old lady desired; went through all the formalities of the day,

dressed carefully every evening, and, to Lady Constance Chomleigh's disgust, became more than ever indispensable at Champfleury.

Madam relented enough at the death of Henry's sickly wife to see him and his handsome boy. He came, received an unusually handsome souvenir, and was dismissed, with the grim reminder of marrying in haste and repenting at leisure. Dick came, and was sent away with a ten-pound note and a flea in his ear.

Still the wills slept under her pillow. Just before Miss Nancy started with her father for Vienna she went down to Champfleury to say good-bye. Then it was that madam declared the wills should be signed, and that Miss Nancy should be a witness. Accordingly, with all her lace and furbelows on, her crooked stick by her side, she was propped up in bed, and everything got in readiness. When Miss Nancy entered she

was fumbling with the two wills so strangely that the little lady ran to help her.

"Keep your place, mite!" she cried, in a huff; "if you want anything to do, *burn that*. Burn it, I say!" she shrieked out, at the top of her voice.

So Miss Nancy took the folded document that was shoved into her hand and put it between the bars of the grate, where it flamed, crackled, and disappeared to the old lady's evident satisfaction and relief. Then the bell was rung and the signing of the other will duly attested by Miss Nancy Stocker and the young footman Townes. Madam died very soon after this, and no one was more surprised than Miss Nancy when the news arrived in Vienna that Richard Falshawe was heir! There it was though in black and white, he got every stick and stone, and within two months had married Marian and gone abroad. There he and his

wife stopped for three or four years, during which poor Henry Torrance got condolence from all sides, and especially from Lady Constance. A good-looking widower is pretty sure of popular sympathy, especially when he has been the victim of maternal injustice.

For some time he was the pet martyr; but when the Falshawes returned, and when the martyr, instead of holding proudly aloof from them, as he ought to have done, must needs spend his time at Champfleury to the neglect of his real friends, why then the popular vane veered right round. Wild rumours filled the air! Champfleury was being gambled for. Mrs. Falshawe had interfered, and the husband and Torrance had fought a duel about her in the woods. There was no end to the marvellous tales, and as Lady Conny edited them, putting in thrilling touches and embellishments, no

one could quite learn the truth. Indeed it was not until the news came from Guernsey of Henry Torrance's death that the public were sure he had gone there after the Champfleury fiasco. Shortly after this Mr. Richard Falshawe completed the little tragedy by breaking his neck in the hunting-field. So altogether a very pretty story reached Miss Stocker at Vienna.

Dearly would she have liked to have known the rights of it and to be sure of what had really happened. Her cousin, Lady Chomleigh, wrote regularly, but her ladyship's lively indifference to the truth, her gush, sentiment, and perpetual digression, did not make Miss Nancy much the wiser. She was told pretty continually that Mrs. Falshawe had ruined Henry Torrance, and was living at Champfleury gloating over her success. Miss Nancy took all this for what it was worth, and wrote off to Marian

herself. She had written often, but nothing confidential was to be elicited from that quarter. On the contrary, so superlatively constrained were the answers that they at once showed something was wrong.

She was not one bit surprised then when she ran down to Champfleury, on her return home, to find Mrs. Falshawe shut up there, shunning her neighbours, and allowing her little daughter Kate to run wild. She found the old outspoken Marian Rowan grown into a nervous unhappy creature, morbidly reticent about speaking of her affairs, and manifestly shirking all advances.

There was no mistaking the cold shoulder, and but for little Kate it is likely Miss Nancy would have gone off in a huff and left the ungracious woman to sulk in her own shell.

But the child had taken her heart by storm, she was being neglected too; in short,

something wanted "sorting" as old Davie would have said, and Miss Nancy set bravely to the work. She stuck to it with burr-like tenacity: "Send Kate to school" was what she dinned day after day in Mrs. Falshawe's ears. "The girl is well enough," the mother would reply testily. "Send her to school!" and so on and so on, till by sheer dint of hammering at it she carried her point and marched Katey off to Miss James's establishment at Blackheath.

Miss Nancy was alone in the world now, the very last tiny twig in the Stocker tree. She wanted a home wherein to end her days, and she wanted an object. Here were both.

So, her wandering life being over, she forthwith settled down at Flowton, where she might be near enough Champfleury to look after her charge. She took her to school and fetched her back, carried her off during the

holidays, here, there, and everywhere, sometimes for a visit to old friends, and sometimes right away to some of those old Continental towns she had known so well with her father.

Her devotion to the child was unceasing, she was more than a mother to her. "Little mother" Kate used to call her; and year by year as Kate crept deeper into her heart the real mother sat brooding at home over some gnawing trouble, which for the life of her Miss Nancy could not fathom. Ten whole years and more had she been trying to get at the bottom of it. She knew well enough that Marian had two arch enemies in her cousin Constance Chomleigh and Paul Torrance. This was natural enough; old Paul was not likely to be well disposed towards any Falshawe, more especially to one who had brought such dire calamity to his family, and, as for Lady Conny's jealous hatred, that

was an old, old story now. Right well Miss Nancy knew it!——

She remembered how, five-and-twenty years ago, Conny had thrown over handsome Henry Torrance for Lord Chomleigh, and was no sooner married than she began plaguing her old lover with jealousy, fussing over his troubles, and making herself the mediator between him and his mother. She threw a sickly wife in his way and sympathised despairingly with him over her loss.

She remembered how this extraordinary lady openly fought his battles, and paid periodical visits to Paul Torrance so as to keep green the memory of his wrongs. She remembered all this, and knew moreover that, though her ladyship was now a widow with a big grown-up son, she still cherished the same unreasoning hatred towards Mrs. Falshawe, and did her very best to make Champfleury unpleasant for her.

But all this scarcely accounted for Mrs. Falshawe's fits of terror and nervousness. There was something more to be learned. What, Miss Nancy could not exactly tell; but if the good little lady had been obliged to formulate her wishes, and disclose her womanly curiosity to the world, she might perhaps have said she would like to know exactly what happened at Champfleury during Henry Torrance's short stay there.

CHAPTER III.

MISS STOCKER PAYS A VISIT.

Flowton is about the brightest little town in her Majesty's dominions.

Perched on the broad slope of the Champfleury hills it catches whatever sunshine may be going, and even from smoky Winford (four miles off as the crow flies) its white houses might be seen sparkling above you while the rest of the world was in shade and gloom.

It is above trade of any sort, and consequently looks down arrogantly on Winford, which, by reason of the fine water-way of the Aire, does a brisk trade in hides and tallows, besides manufacturing a few common chemicals by way of giving an odorous variety to the atmosphere.

Winford laughs at Flowton; but lo and behold! no sooner does a Winford man grub enough money together out of his grease and his acids than he forthwith hies up to Flowton and there builds himself a little square house, from which he soon learns to look down on the scene of his labours. If he goes marketing to Winford he gets out of it as soon as he can; and, like the Meccan pilgrim, raises his voice in thanksgiving when he sees his beloved town shining on the hill side.

They are all alike, these little square houses. The same bright little garden-plot, the same front door, the same chimneys, all

monotonously alike; even to the crochet blind—that decorous network so indicative of middle-class gentility.

Higher up are three or four houses of more ambitious proportions, in one of which, "The Laurels," lived Mr. Camelford. Half-a-mile or so beyond this, Champfleury peeps out from amongst its big trees, and from this a pretty sharp ascent of a mile and a half takes you on to the Moss, a wild spot like a bit of Scotland tumbled into the wrong place. Here the wary call of the curlew warns your approach, moorfowl spring up at your feet, and plovers flap querulously above your head.

Here of a winter's day come the more robust of the Flowton youths to skate on the little lake and take health and strength from the bracing air.

What a view there is from the high knoll! You can see the silvery Aire crawling

through wood and meadow, sending out here and there tiny branches, which, after tasting the meadow-sweet and kingcups, return like prodigals to the parent stream lower down. You can see it hurrying past dirty Winford, and, finally, its work done, lose itself in the sea beyond.

Never was a sunnier, brighter, healthier, little place; and never did the sun shine brighter on it than it did on the morning after Miss Nancy Stocker's inharmonious little dinner.

It shone on her garden-plot, it shone on her sparkling windows, and there, finding a tiny chink in the Venetians, sent in an inquisitive ray which lighted up a pinky-white note that was lying on her breakfast-table.

She opened it a little impatiently and read:

"DEAREST OF NANCIES,

"You will be all of a pucker when I tell you

that your new doctor is my poor martyr'd Henry's son! Mind you, I have had no more to do with his coming to Flowton than the Man in the Moon, and never should have known one word about it if I had not happened to call on old Paul Torrance when I was in London the other day. All I know about the young fellow is that he is like his poor father, and *has a sort of a manner*. He is Charley's greatest friend. They were at Cambridge and Paris together. What in the name of all that is wonderful made him take to doctoring is more than I can tell you! He says it was because he wanted *real* work, and this, my dear, looks as if he had a real bee in his bonnet.

"Charley swears by him! and not to be separated has taken the Champfleury shootings. Of course this had to be done through an agent—very, very gingerly too, I can tell you. Bless me! if your dearly-beloved friend had had the slightest notion a Chomleigh was coming she would have had a fit. Coming he is though, and will set up house with young Torrance. I only hope the two will give the old Champfleury cat a lively time of it!

"My dear, dear! I'm going to Eauxbonnes! There's news for you! Fancy poor me being

away from London for a whole season; but I'll tell you why I'm going. London is unhealthy. Measles are raging, *raging*, dear! You know what a fool I am about these things? Then I've had a cough all the winter, and can't get rid of those abominable specks on my cheek. I can't get my dear little house either, next to your pet hotel, in Dover Street, so altogether I thought I'd go.

"Jenner says its nothing; but then you know he never takes an interest in any body unless they are dying. I shall take the faithful Josephine of course, and we shall see Maurice on our way through Paris.

"My dear Nan, that woman is a genius. Beats Worth hollow for bodies. Do let me bring you something for your head, dear. Don't go about any longer with that Tower of Babel on it. Maurice will know exactly what you ought to wear.

"Of course it is a pang not to be in London at the very best time, but you know how faddy I am about houses. Charley says I shan't be satisfied till I go to that place where there are so many mansions; but the profane darling is very good about it, and quite franks me to Eaux-bonnes. Mind he doesn't fall in love with every

pretty girl in the place, like his father before him!

"I shall come and say good-bye to you.

"Your affectionate coz.

"CONNIE."

This daintily written patchouli-scented epistle, with its airy touches and affectionate dear dears, spoilt Miss Nancy's breakfast. She nibbled her toast and sipped her tea, but made a poor hand of it. She mounted her horn spectacles, (her ancestral eyes, she called them,) and carefully spelt through the letter again. No spectacles were needed to read between the lines. There was mischief in it, and, what was more, there was danger to those she loved in it. Lady Conny and old Paul nursed a sympathetic hatred against Mrs. Falshawe. They trotted her out for dissection whenever they met, and now, to crown it all, had sent these two

young men to Flowton, to give the widow a lively time! It was as plain as a pikestaff! a pretty plot, indeed, to be hatched against a defenceless woman by a couple of people calling themselves Christians! a nice little outbreak of gossip there would be, too; for the happy Flowtonians, living so entirely in their own little world of busy idleness, were preternaturally observant. So sympathetic, too, that nothing pleased them so much as discussing each others' affairs. In short they were arrant gossips, and Mr. Camelford was their king. He would pick up stray bits at Mr. Crillick's the druggist, or at Bungey's the draper, and deliver oracular opinions thereon. Champfleury was their standing-dish, and Miss Nancy knew it. There was trouble and danger ahead, and that was why Mrs. Falshawe was eating her heart out up there at Champfleury.

The sooner she got at the bottom of this

the better for Kate, so without more ado she donned the high-crowned bonnet, just denounced by Lady Conny, and started for Champfleury.

She chose the back lanes out of the town so as to avoid inopportune gossipers, and perforce travelled slowly, because for some time her heart had taken on the unpleasant trick of going faster than her feet. She had some dismal forebodings, but who could resist the gracious influence of that bright May morning, with the sweet promise of Spring on every side, and the lark trilling his hymn of live and rejoice, high overhead? Not Miss Nancy!

The children smiled, and bobbed their curtseys as they went to school, and the Tower of Babel bobbed gleefully back; young Phil Munday tried to slink by and hide his tatters, but was overhauled severely, and sent off with a sixpence to buy buttons. Two

or three of her pensioners were visited and comforted, and Miss Stocker, taking courage from the exercise, reached the Champfleury Avenue one of the happiest-minded little ladies in Christendom.

No sooner there, than she pricked up her ears at a medley sound of shrieks, laughter, and horses' hoofs. The next moment Bob the pony cantered up, but was brought to such a sudden stand by the prompt opening of Miss Nancy's umbrella that he deposited his burden, in the shape of Miss Rosie Camelford, all of a heap in the road. She was a dimpled-face reproduction of her mother, wore a fringe of curls across her forehead, and was considered a very nice girl.

"I knew it! I was sure of it!" she cried with comical consternation, but not offering to move.

"Jump up, child! jump up!" said Miss Nancy.

"That comes of tight skirts!" laughed Miss Kate Falshawe, running up and saluting Miss Nancy with a kiss before she gave a hand to the prostrate Rosie.

"Who ever heard of riding bare-backed in tight skirts? Take it off, Rosie, and try again."

"Do nothing of the sort!" said her sister, who had joined them leisurely.

Miss Vi took after her father. She was not regarded so favourably as her sister by other girls. She soared above them, so they said, far in the clouds, so high it strained their eyes to follow her. She affected literature and abhorred frivoling.

"Please brush the dust off me then before we go on to the high-road," said Rosie, penitently, holding out her skirt. And, as this necessary operation was being performed, Miss Nancy could but note what a charming tableau the three girls made under the elms,

with Bob grazing by their side, and the rooks cawing overhead.

Like as not you would have passed Kate Falshawe without much notice. She was worth looking at though. She had a tall shapely figure, and carried herself defiantly. As to her features, there was nothing very notable, save, indeed, the clear truth and honesty that shone out from the depths of her grey eyes. These same eyes had a saucy glint in them at times, especially when she succeeded in shocking people, which she very often did. She was the very picture of health, though Mrs. Camelford never ceased lamenting over her freckles, and wondering why her mother did not insist on that wonderful crop of auburn hair being more symmetrically arranged on the top of her head.

"You have come in the very nick of time Nan!" she said, hitching Bob's bridle over

her arm and walking by Miss Nancy's side after she had wished the Camelford girls good-bye. "I was on my way to your house. We have heard the news."

"And your mother is upset about it, eh?"

"Yes, terribly, but won't show it, that's the worst of it. What is the meaning of these men coming and sitting down at our very gates?"

"Never mind them!"

"I don't mind them a fig! but the mother must not hide herself any longer. They will think we are afraid of them."

"Just what I've come about. Have you anything fresh to tell me?"

"Nothing! Wait a bit though, I put this in my pocket to show you." Checking Bob for a moment she handed Miss Nancy a scrap of paper, on which was written, "*Try what repentance can do, what can it not?—Shakespeare.*" "Old Townes gave me this

to-day. He says he thinks she gets many of the same sort."

"Impertinent nonsense!" said Miss Nancy.

"Yes! and if I was a man I'd find out who sent it, and thrash the nonsense out of him!"

And so strongly did Miss Kate Falshawe emphasize her words on poor Bob's back that he jerked his head clear and trotted off. "Go on, Nanny!" she cried: "go on and see what you can do."

Miss Nancy accordingly made her way along the low long front of the house to the portico, and here, by standing on tip-toe, managed to catch hold of the bell-handle and set the bell a clanging.

"Well, Townes, what news?"

"Pretty bad, Miss Stocker, pretty bad," he said, shaking his head; "but there, I'm glad you have come, maybe you'll speak a word."

Mr. Townes was a good deal changed since

that time when he and Miss Stocker attested old madam's signature to the will. He had grown portly and boasted of the gout. He showed Miss Nancy into the morning-room, where, on several shallow pretexts, he limped and lingered about while he poured the old lament into her ears. He was privileged from long service, and spoke out of the fullness of his heart. She had been a good mistress—none better. She had done justice by the place, as Mr. Steele the bailiff could testify. Look at the grounds, weren't they in apple-pie order? but this shutting herself up and seeing nobody was bad. Not fair to Miss Kate, and Miss Kate was beginning to feel it. No, he did not know what it was all about. He blamed old Janey for a good deal of it. There were some women who were dampers and some who were cheerers. Jane was a damper; but now that this Mr. Torrance had come to the

place (and Lor! wouldn't old madam turn in her grave if she knew her grandson had taken to doctoring!) he hoped his mistress would wake up and take her stand as the lady of the manor.

Then he hobbled off, and presently returned to conduct the visitor upstairs.

Mrs. Falshawe was quite the Grand Dame, and made, with her fine figure and white hair, a fitting-looking mistress for Champfleury. She seemed to belong to the old-fashioned comforts and refinements which surrounded her. The Torrance portraits, which had never been moved since old madam's death, did not upbraid her. She lived among them, pleased with the devotion of her servants, and proud of her daughter's graceful presence. Yet, withal, she was an unhappy woman. A terrified woman too Miss Stocker thought by the first look which greeted her as she entered.

"Why are you moping here this sweet morning, Marian?" she began.

"Moping!" the widow said with a sickly smile. "These papers don't look much like that, Nancy! These are Steele's plans for draining the Moss."

"Come up to the Moss then, and look at it. That's the way your father would have set about it. I want to talk with you."

"I know what you have to talk about. Of course these two men coming is a worry. Just another bit of persecution. We shall jog along all the same, I dare say."

"You shan't jog along in the same way, if I can help it! That's what I have come about. It has been going on too long. Listen to me. I'm your friend, and I love Kate. She is fretting at your mopes, and I won't have it! Tell me all about it."

"About what?"

"Don't fence. About the Torrance business, from beginning to end."

"You know the wretched story as well as I do! And you know it can't be pleasant to have young Torrance here?"

"My good woman—you were moping long and long before he came."

"I've had troubles enough to make any woman mope."

"What are trials and troubles given us for but to be faced and knocked on the head so as to keep us in good exercise?"

"You can't call me lazy, if that's what you mean! Goodness knows I've enough to do. What with leases, drainings, farm repairs, top-dressing for the home paddock, and one thing and another."

"Some people require as much top-dressing as the ground," Miss Nancy observed sententiously.

"The estate has been well cared for, Nancy."

"You look after the shell and forget the kernel. I don't care a snap of my fingers for your farms and fields. I care for Kate; and you are making her unhappy. The girl is grown up. It is too bad. Let me see—how old is she?"

"She? Kate? Oh, she is getting on! I'm so worried that I lose all dates."

"A woman must be rarely dazed to forget her own child's age! You are moping yourself silly. Nineteen she says. She will be marrying one of these days."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Falshawe, with an uneasy laugh. "Perhaps Mr. Camelford sent you here to talk about Cyril marrying her. That is the grand man's last craze."

"Serve you right! You are fair game for any fool; but I'll call in on my way back and put a stop to that nonsense."

"What would you have me do?"

"Behave like the mistress of Champfleury! Open your doors and welcome these young men; don't let them suppose you are afraid of them."

"My natural enemies!"

"Up and scratch 'em then! Once let Lady Conny know you are afraid of her and she will dance the rigadoon over you. I wouldn't stand that. Ask Paul Torrance's nephew here as if nothing had happened."

"Paul Torrance will never forgive me about his brother."

"What happened then when he was here with you?"

"All the world knows what happened. He gambled, betted, got into debt. Paul had to pay; and Paul never forgets."

Though she spoke glibly Miss Nancy knew by her flushed face and trembling lips that she was keeping something back. So when

she ceased the little lady said never a word, but kept her eyes firmly fixed on her companion's. Now, when you don't want to say a thing it is highly uncomfortable to have a pair of bead-like eyes devouring you, and screwing the secret out of you willy-nilly.

Mrs. Falshawe could not stand it, so jumped up and said:

"You are really trying me too much, Nancy. You would not have me speak ill of my husband?"

"No, Marian; but, for Kate's sake, I'd have you tell me what is on your mind. Don't say there is nothing; I know better! Bless me if I have a bad tooth I trot off to the dentist's, clutch the chair, open my mouth and take what God sends me with the best grace I can. I don't mump and moan. Now then—out with it!"

For a moment it seemed as if she would respond to this homely appeal. She gulped

something down in her throat, her eyes moistened, and she involuntarily held out her hand. Then with a woman's capriciousness as quickly withdrew it, declaring hastily that there really was nothing on her mind. Nothing! She had been a little neglectful of Kate, but that could easily be remedied. Perhaps they might have people there, and perhaps Kate might go to London with the Burgoynes. They had often and often asked her. If she had anything on her mind of course she would tell it to Miss Nancy, their very best friend—Kate's little mother!

But the little mother sat in grim silence. "Are you going to make a clean breast of it?" she asked sternly.

"Kate would not like me to speak about her father," Mrs. Falshawe replied, with an air of reproval.

Upon this Miss Nancy jumped up, and walked off in high dudgeon.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. CAMELFORD SPEAKS.

Miss Stocker was so put out by Mrs. Falshawe's last words that she bounced off without even saying good-bye. She shirked Kate, wouldn't say a word to old Janey, who tried to waylay her in the hall, let herself out of the front door, and stole away. The sting of the rebuff sent her little legs spinning along the avenue, her heart went twenty to the dozen, so that by the time she

reached the high road she was glad to take a rest on the first friendly gate.

She was perched panting there, smoothing her ruffled feelings and half inclined to go back and make another appeal just for Katey's sake, when Mr. Pinnock came striding by. He had been up to the Moss, he said, to walk off a headache. That Port *was* too young. Mr. Camelford would not believe him when he said so last night, but he would believe him fast enough now for he had heard he was very bad indeed! Shouldn't wonder if he had not sent for the new doctor! "This is a queer start if ever there was one, Miss Nancy!" he went on as they slowly descended the hill together. "Fancy a Torrance coming here! everybody will have something to say about that. I only hope it won't bring any trouble to your friend Miss Katey."

"Why should it?" Miss Nancy asked quickly.

"Well, I suppose old Paul is at the bottom of it, but if you don't know who should?"

"Mr. Pinnock, I know nothing!" she said, stopping suddenly in her distress; "I was abroad when this young doctor's father got into trouble at Champfleury; I have never seen Paul Torrance."

"Ah, I forgot! Well, old Paul must be a queer customer at all events. And, though the Falshawes behaved badly to me and mine, I do hope he is not plotting any trouble for Miss Kate. I don't know the rights of it quite. Davis may know something."

"D'ye mean the Winford lawyer?"

"Yes, our old clerk! I'm sleeping partner in the business still: go there now and then on my way to and from London; I could ask him."

"For goodness sake, Mr. Pinnock, don't go playing Paul Pry for me!"

"That's a hard slap, Miss Nancy; but isn't

it a pity that Miss Kate should get into trouble just for want of knowing the rights of it? Lord Chomleigh too! I've been thinking about it up at the Moss there. Say what you like, *it is queer*. Why, you don't know what ground you are standing on. Miss Kate may be walking into a quicksand for all you know."

"I don't see what can be done," she said in great perplexity.

"I know what *I* should do. I should just take the bearings, and find out what old Paul's game was. That's what I should do. I should meet cunning with cunning."

"I daresay it's all right." Miss Nancy said this in a tone that meant just the reverse, and the lawyer was sharp enough to recognise it.

"It's not all right, Miss Nancy," said he, "to let people walk over you while you are asleep. I've known a lot of trouble come

of that. I might speer about a little for you."

"Please don't!" she cried in alarm.

"Oh, it's no trouble! Not a bit! I've so many irons in the fire, too, that I am as much in London as I am here. Trouble! Who wouldn't take trouble for you, Miss Nancy? Don't I know who sent old Ford that fifty pounds? Don't I know you are going to give my chum, Tom, a start? He is all cock-a-hoop about going abroad. We are going to have a day at the rats down at my farm, when I come back. Oh! you're going in here, are you?" he said, as she stopped at the gate of The Laurels. Well, just you ask King Cam whether he thinks the wine too young or not *now;* and I say, Miss Nancy, mark my words: He has *got an eye on Champfleury for Cyril."*

"Nonsense!" said she angrily, as he walked off.

But this was the very thing that brought her there—the very nonsense she had determined to put a stop to; and it so happened that her visit was most opportune, Mr. Camelford being at that very moment engaged in the laborious undertaking of writing a letter to her. It was laborious, because the letter was one of the utmost importance, one that required all the resources of delicate and apt phraseology, and—Mr. Camelford's head ached.

He awoke with hot hands and a fiery brain. He came down, and, while his wife read the morning prayers, relieved the tension of his throbbing temples by thrusting his head so far between the steel springs at the back of his chair that he with difficulty got it out again. He could not eat his breakfast, and was highly incensed at Cyril laying it to the Port, and languidly declaring the philter was beginning to work. But when his nephew

went on still further, and not only to have the audacity to defend the lawyer but to say boldly that he was not half such a sham as they, there sprang up a little breeze which became strong enough (much to Miss Vi's mortification) to drive the gifted Cyril back to London.

After his departure they soothed the master of the house in the best way they could. They bathed his head with *Eau de Cologne,* they gave him strong tea, but it was not until they disclosed the astounding news about the quality of their new neighbours that he acknowledged to feeling any better. A real lord and a real Torrance! Here was something to clear his brain and make him pull himself together! for, be it known, Mr. Camelford in his quiet dignified way was a grand schemer of schemes; those ponderous jokes and occult hints of his about Cyril and Kate, to which he privately treated Miss

Stocker and Mrs. Falshawe, were only puffs of smoke belonging to a mighty flame.

Yes! his pet plan was to marry Cyril to the heiress of Champfleury. How the thought first took hold of him goodness knows. It may have been a sudden inspiration, or it may have gradually grown with Kate's growth. At all events it clutched him tight, and fed him with such intoxicating visions for the future, that he unconsciously assumed that increased importance and grandeur of gait which had caused Mr. Pinnock to dub him "King Cam"; he had schemed and pondered, and built airy castles about it, till it had become his *idée fixe*.

'Camelford of Champfleury! Camelford of Champfleury!' he would repeat to himself, as he periodically went up the hill to prospect the situation with Mrs. Falshawe. Why the very names seemed wedded, so symphonious were they.

The advent of these young men brought matters to a crisis. It was high time to act. The engagement should be arranged and announced without delay, and the one person of all others in the world to help him was Miss Nancy Stocker. He saw no hitch, and as the pain gradually lifted from his temples, and that pleasing lassitude came over him which belongs to the recovery of a bad headache, his mind filled with golden visions.

With Lord Chomleigh for an opposite neighbour there seemed no end to the rosy perspective. He not only saw a Camelford at Champfleury, but he saw a coronet at his daughter's feet. He must not waste a moment! He must write to Miss Stocker at once. He was in the throes of his letter, his hand was on his head, he was about to give it up in despair, when he heard she was actually in the house. At this welcome announcement he pushed aside the writing

materials, threw off his flowery dressing-gown, carefully arranged his toilette, and went down. His wife and Miss Nancy were already deep in the all-absorbing topic.

"Any relation of yours, Miss Stocker," he chimed in gleefully, "would be received warmly, and be sure we shall welcome Lord Chomleigh in a manner befitting his station. I once had the pleasure of meeting Lady Chomleigh years ago in London, and now we will try and make her son's stay pleasant at Flowton. As to Henry Torrance's son, he will be received with open arms by the whole county. What a whim his taking to doctoring! Well, history repeats itself. A romantic whim brought his father to Champfleury, and now another brings his son here! Not pleasant for Mrs. Falshawe, did you say, Laura? Perhaps not at first, but it will be a good thing for her! It will rouse her and help to blow away these back-door

stories about bundles of compromising letters, and other rubbishing tales invented by people of the Pinnock type. That man is the village pest, Miss Stocker! He actually said to Crillick the other day, 'It must be something queasy queery that made Mrs. Falshawe lock herself up at Champfleury.' Those were his words, for I made Crillick repeat them, 'queasy queery.'"

"Did you know Henry Torrance?" Miss Nancy asked as unconcernedly as she could.

"Oh, yes! I met him at Champfleury. Gentlemanlike, goodlooking fellow, but he plunged. My friend Falshawe — well—he plunged too. He was fond of horseracing, and there was a crash. These accidents will happen among gentlemen, and, when they do, some Pinnock man invariably turns up to blare out his queasy queery. I have no patience with this Winford attorney. No home is safe. He has been queasy queerying

all over the place. I have made it my business to inquire. Falshawe was quite right to take his business from a sporting lawyer, and put it into the hands of such steady-going people as Mastermans."

"Ah!" sighed Mrs. Camelford compassionately, "I pity poor Mrs. Falshawe! Remember, Martin, she is only a woman, and has no prop to lean upon as I have! I do think, and always have thought, that she would be the better for rousing."

"And roused she shall be!" rejoined her prop. "Miss Nancy here will help us. She is Mrs. Falshawe's friend. My dear Laura, if you will leave us alone for a few minutes we will arrange everything!"

Hereupon he opened the door for his wife with great courtliness, closed it carefully behind her, came back on tip-toe to his seat, and, drawing it nearer to his visitor, began in his most propitiatory tones.

"Laura is right, Miss Nancy. Mrs. Falshawe must positively be roused from her lethargy. Now is the time!"

"You had better go up and tell her so."

"I may as well speak to that bust," he replied, pointing to his own sculptured likeness, which stood in the corner on a grand scagliola pillar. "She is stone-deaf to every appeal I make—even when I speak about her daughter Kate."

"Speak to Kate, then."

"No, no!" he said playfully; "I appeal to you! Surely you would not have your *protégée* climbing trees and running paperchases all her life, Miss Stocker! Her tomboy days are past! I have a deeper interest in her than you suppose. *I have a future for her!*"

"Bless me!" she cried, in mock alarm. "This is a most momentous announcement!

I am sure Kate is vastly obliged to you! What is it?"

"—Sh! I want to marry her to Cyril."

"We've had enough of that stale joke!"

"Why persist in calling it a joke?" he asked warmly.

"I'll call it insulting if you like!"

"Surely a Camelford is as good as a Falshawe?"

"D'ye mean to tell me that Cyril has been making love to her?"

"That depends on what you call 'making love.'"

"Any fool knows that! Billing and cooing, I suppose?"

"Ah!" said he, smiling and shaking his head slowly, "you little know Cyril. He is about the last man in the world to bill and coo, as you call it."

"Except with Violet," Miss Nancy put in, cruelly.

"You wrong him, Miss Nancy!" he said quickly. "You wrong Vi. You wrong us all! You are utterly and entirely mistaken. He has the strongest objections to cousins marrying!"

"Then why bill and coo?" she reiterated, nodding her head rhythmically.

"I say you wrong us!" he protested, ruffled in spite of himself. "In Violet he has found a sympathetic mind. One who understands his aims. A twin soul! as he puts it."

"Bosh!"

"I have not said one word to him yet," he went on, not heeding this vulgar interjection, "because he is so altogether out of the common ruck. I preferred speaking to you first. 'Tis true he would marry an heiress, but he would give as much as he got. Mrs. Falshawe is, so to speak, under a cloud. Now Cyril would——"

"Enough of this nonsense, Mr. Camelford!" she interrupted angrily; "I came here on purpose to let you know we will have no more of it! Cyril indeed! When my girl marries I hope it will be real flesh and blood!"

"Flesh and blood, Miss Stocker!" he cried, jumping up. "What do you mean? Are the Camelfords not real flesh and blood? Am I not real flesh and blood?"

The good humour lighted up her eyes again as she measured the portly form before her. "I believe you are!" she laughed, "but there! there! I lost my temper, fizzed over, and I am sorry. But mind you!" and she shook her finger at him, "no more of it, not a word! not the ghost of a hint to Kate or anybody else; let it drop, and perhaps I'll forgive you. Now I am going to look after the girls."

He was quite willing to let it drop, for a

time at least. He had done quite as much as he expected to do. He had broken the ice, and had said his say, the rest would follow all in good time. Not the shadow of a doubt crossed his mind as to the ultimate success of his pet plan; and he marched off by Miss Nancy's side in a state of serene contentment.

Rosie and Vi were in full chatter about the news, and a pair of very unnatural young women they would have been had they not shown some healthy excitement at the prospect of these two young men coming so near them. They could talk of nothing else —Aunt Nan must stop to lunch and tell them all about it. So she did, and after the meal submitted to be pumped with the greatest good nature.

She knew nothing about young Torrance, but a deal about Lord Chomleigh. Yes, he was a cousin, but so far removed that you'd

need a strong telescope to make it out. He was the biggest and best-natured donkey in the world. Six feet two. Called her Aunt Nan, and could hold her in his hand. Everybody's favourite, and especially addicted to falling in love.

So she chirruped on till Kate came, and when tennis was over Kate escorted her through the village to her own door. Aunt Nan was glad enough of her arm too, for she was unusually tired and tottery.

She had to tell the girl how she had failed with her mother. "But we'll stick to her, Kate!" she said as they parted. "We won't let this go on! we'll rout her out by hook or by crook. And, look here, whatever you do, make her hold her head up to these young sparks. I shall send for young Torrance to-morrow, and find out what he wants here." She spoke half in joke, but it so happened she made his acquaintance that very evening,

for the fatigues and worries of the day brought on such an attack of palpitations, twitchings, spasms, and short breathings, that Jessie, after giving her mistress some of old Dr. Ford's drops, and using all the domestic remedies she knew of, ran off in dire consternation for the new doctor; and this new doctor, in spite of her prejudice against him, made a favourable impression. Miss Nancy had not knocked about the world all these years without knowing an honest man when she met him. His "sort of a manner" was masterful, and one that cheered and inspired confidence—a most desirable combination! and Aunt Nan was rendered very happy thereby.

The only thing she did not like was being peremptorily told she must rest, and, to begin with, was ordered to lay up on the sofa for a week or ten days at the least.

CHAPTER V.

COUNTERPLOTTING.

Flowton was greatly exercised by the arrival of Lord Chomleigh. He came down to inspect the shootings and set all the village astir. Rosie and Vi, from the tennis-ground, and their elders from the morning-room, saw the cab drive up to Dr. Torrance's gate. Saw a fair-haired, good-natured-looking young Saxon giant jump out, and with noisy greetings from his friend disappear indoors.

After lunch they saw the same strong-limbed young fellow sally out clad in knicker-bockers, with the keeper by his side. Even a third time on that eventful day did they see him, for, as they were coming out of the Champfleury gates, lo and behold he strode so suddenly upon them in his seven-league boots that he instinctively raised his hat, and thereby disclosed for their admiration a curly head worthy of Antinous.

Vi dubbed him Geraint then and there, and as Geraint he was known for many a day at The Laurels.

He was entirely satisfied with his venture, and declared to his friend, as they sat over their smoke at night, that for once he had fallen on his legs.

Torrance had heard this same cheerful remark more than once before though. Charley Chomleigh was always performing this gymnastic exercise, and getting badly

bruised over it at times. There was an unusual insistance about it now though, which made his friend prick up his ears. He knew the shooting was nothing remarkable; but Lord Chomleigh declared the prospect was first-rate, coverts right size, with plenty of water and undergrowth, heaps of birds, and the bit of moss would give a jolly bit of wild shooting in the winter.

"And you saw the house?" Torrance asked.

"Yes, I saw your place, just a peep of it through the trees, but I saw something at the gates a deal prettier."

"Oh!"

"Two of the jolliest girls you ever saw! Ran bolt upon them as they were coming out."

"At it again, Charley?"

"I give you my word, one is more like the picture of an angel than anything human!"

"Ah!" laughed Torrance. "An angel with a fringe over her brow! I know her!"

"Call it a nimbus, Harry!"

"I can tell you Miss Nimbus's name, if you like."

"Out with it!"

"Rosie Camelford."

"A good name for the sweetest and prettiest rose that ever blew!"

"Can't you meet a pretty girl without raving about her?"

"Not this one; simply because I never saw such a face before! One might have dreamed of it, but never could you have expected to see it living and breathing. Take it as you please now," he went on, with tremendous fervour. "Take the individual features or the face as a whole. It is childlike I grant you; but I ask you, dispassionately, Harry, did you ever see any girl's face quite so lovely? No chaff now!"

"Oh, Lor, I don't know! These terribly pretty dolls don't interest me much."

"Doll is about the last term I should apply to *her*," rejoined his friend. "I'll bet you what you like, that girl is brim-full of life and animation. Where does she live?"

Harry took the cigar from his lips, and waved it towards the front windows.

"Rather vague!" said his friend. "D'ye mean to say she lives in space?"

"Miss Nimbus lives exactly opposite to us," replied Harry. "You'll be able to see her every day playing tennis."

"That's cheering! We're going to have a good time!"

"I'm not quite so sure about that!" said Harry, dubiously. "We have to talk about it. I can a tale unfold! Light up and listen. Put Miss Nimbus out of your head, and prepare to gnash your teeth. First of

all, you have heard of my uncle, Paul Torrance?"

"The Brixton Wizard, with the theatrical establishment? I should think so, dozens of times, from the mater."

"Yes? We have a unique establishment at Dean House! We have a Hamlet for a butler, a Cassio for a coachman, an ancient super for a gardener, and a goose that has acted in the pantomime. I'm not sure that the cook wasn't Desdemona, and the housemaid Juliet. We are chuck-full of stage properties. It is a harmless hobby of my uncle's, but he has a hobby that is not quite so harmless, and this is Champfleury!"

"Ah! I know. Awfully hard on you, old man!"

"Nonsense! What's the use of crying over spilt milk? What do I know or care about Champfleury. Exit Torrance and enter Falshawe. That's all! When he gets

on Champfleury and hints about mysteries, muddles, will forgings, and other lively diableries, I'm deaf. I won't hear a word! I bolt!"

"Hard on you!" murmured his friend sleepily from the sofa with his eyes fixed on the windows.

"At the sound of Champfleury or Falshawe, Charley, I incontinently bolt! Then he lets fly Shakespeare at me. I'm not safe from a shot even here. Listen to this note I got three days ago:—

'*Be sure and get as intimate as you can at Champfleury, and when you have made a friend of the present occupant let me know, for then our turn will come.*'

'P.S.—Time is the old Justice who tries all offenders.'

What d'ye think of that?"

"Snap-shot!"

"Yes; and it has hit the mark! It

rankles! He hates Mrs. Falshawe like poison, so does your mother. How came you to get this shooting?"

"She managed it. I was away fishing you know. She and the agent managed every blessed thing between 'em. When I got back it was all cut and dried! She is awfully clever!"

"Exactly! *She* sent you here, and *Uncle Paul* sent me here! Now!" banging his fist on the table, "what d'ye make of that?"

"Jolly good of them?"

"Jolly good, eh?" cried Harry, jumping up and striding about the room. "You call jolly good to be made a cat's-paw of, do you? Jolly good to be made to do some dirty work just to gratify somebody else's spite?"

"I don't quite see it in that light, Harry."

"You're sleepy! you're dunch! A dodge got you here and a dodge got me here. When

my uncle found they wanted a doctor here he hinted that I wouldn't dare face Champfleury. This put my dander up, and off I came. Your mother must have been planning the shooting at the very same time. We've been made fools of!"

"I don't mind!" said his lordship, with another lazy glance at the window.

"Wake up, man! D'ye mean to say you don't mind being sent here just to bully a lady you have never seen?"

"If I thought that I'd chuck up the whole thing!"

"Ha ha! the clever beauty of it is we can't chuck it up! You can't throw over Mrs. Falshawe, and I can't throw over old Ford. But we will turn the tables on them, my boy. We will show Mrs. Falshawe we did not come here to annoy her. *We will call.*"

"That's not quite the thing, is it?"

"You've taken the shooting, and call out

of courtesy. I'm the new doctor and I call out of duty. Yes, we will turn the tables on the old folk by becoming a couple of joyous peace-makers, who will put an end to all the old squabbling. Dost see the final tableau, my lord? Uncle Paul in his wheeled chair, your mother on one side and Mrs. Falshawe on the other, with you and me in the background doing the olive-branch business. What say you to that? Does that touch you?"

"I'm with you!"

"All right! we must keep our own counsel though!"

"We will! Now tell me about the place. What about Aunt Nancy Stocker?"

"The little woman is under my tender mercies just now. Weak heart and gads about too much. Cyril Camelford should write a book about her good deeds; she is a diamond edition of Goodness! Gives no end of help to the poor. Puts such faith in

gastronomy as a civilizing agent that she has converted her stable into a model kitchen where she teaches them to cook. Loses no end of money over her 'Benefit Society,' and commits a pious fraud in trying to make people believe it pays. Looked after poor old Ford all through his illness, and now has taken his loafing son in hand. She is the Beneficent Fairy of the place."

"I'll interview the Beneficent Fairy to-morrow! What is the night like?" he yawned, going to the window and pulling up the blind.

"The inhabitants do not play tennis by moonlight here as a rule," Harry replied; and thereupon his friend hurled a cushion at his head and bolted upstairs to dream of Rosie.

Next day they opened the siege of Champfleury by leaving their cards. Then Lord Chomleigh called on Miss Nancy and was so

clumsily mysterious she could make nothing of him. Within the week he had returned Mr. Camelford's call and overpowered that gentleman by his affability. He consulted him about the shootings, about the kennels, the keeper's cottage, every conceivable thing. There was a deal to be done, and with Mr. Camelford's advice Lord Chomleigh declared he would stop and look after it himself. That must have been about the happiest time of Mr. Camelford's life. To be Lord Chomleigh's counsellor, to be seen walking through the village with him to the workshop where the kennels and cottage were being planned, and back again past Crillick's and Bungey's shops recapitulating the bags that his friend Falshawe used to make on the Champfleury hills, must have been unalloyed pleasure to him.

Lord Chomleigh, too, suddenly developed a surprising interest in tennis. Rosie could

beat him easily, so he preferred playing with her because it improved him; he gave himself up to the delight of the game, and to the still greater delight of daily falling deeper in love with Miss Nimbus; booby-like, too, trying to blind his friend by mendaciously declaring that she was not quite so pretty as he thought at first sight. Perhaps she *was* a trifle dollish.

After this had been going on for some days, Harry said suddenly to him one morning, "We've not got inside Champfleury yet; don't forget *that* is our object. Mrs. Falshawe has made no sign. She won't let her daughter come to The Laurels. This won't do! The Burgoynes are noticing it. So, if you please, we will hie off to Miss Nancy Stocker and consult her."

Now Miss Nancy had seen Kate daily—wondered a little at the girl's reticence about the young men, but never for a moment

suspected that she had given up going to The Laurels. So when she found that these two honest gentlemen were really anxious to be friendly at Champfleury she wrote off at once to Mrs. Falshawe, and told her point-blank that keeping Kate from The Laurels was nothing more nor less than a vulgar insult to two gentlemen who had behaved very civilly to her.

Down came Kate after this. "What am I to do?" she cried; "the mother says one thing and you say another. How can I meet these men when we know that Lord Chomleigh got the shooting, in a hole-and-corner sort of way, so that he and Mr. Torrance may stalk all over the place?"

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Miss Nancy. "Go and judge for yourself. What will the Burgoynes think of you for staying away? Go and meet them this very day. They are not wild beasts or bandits."

So to the everybody's delight, for she was a prime favourite, and out-and-out the best tennis-player, Kate appeared at The Laurels. A very defiant combative young lady though, if the truth must be known, and a trifle put out that she found nothing to quarrel with. Dr. Torrance was passive, and she looked upon that as a bit of affectation, considering their relative positions. Lord Chomleigh was boisterous; but in spite of herself she was swept into the game, and laughed with the rest at his lordship's blunders.

The young men were jubilant. They had taken the first approaches to Champfleury! The citadel would follow, it only wanted time. So they dallied away the sunny June days in Mr. Camelford's pleasance, secretly enlarging their cunningly conceived counter-plot according to their own private views and aims. For instance, by way of

a further blind, Lord Chomleigh must needs try to make it appear he was deeply smitten with Kate, telling Miss Nancy confidentially, over a cup of tea, that he had never met such a nice girl before, never! In fact, so smitten was he, he had determined to send for his horses and stay some time at Flowton. She was just the sort of girl his mother would like; and the villain actually went to the length of writing several warm letters to his mother, all of them in such a laudatory and gushing strain, about Miss Falshawe, that her ladyship would have been in considerable anxiety had she not been thoroughly case-hardened, from long experience, with these tender ebullitions.

Harry had heard a little about Miss Kate Falshawe during his attendance on Miss Stocker. He had brushed by her more than once on the door-step, and the very first glance of her clear honest face was

enough to determine him to carry out his programme. Now at The Laurels he watched her lithesome figure with growing interest, and thereby strengthened his resolution to make things straight at Champfleury.

Miss Nancy Stocker herself, too, saw part of this gentle comedy being acted.

The very first drive she took in Kate's pony-chaise was to see tennis played at The Laurels, and there the little lady's eyes were soon opened to what was going on. She saw at once through Lord Chomleigh's shallow pretence of devotion to Kate and having eyes for some one else, and that some one all of a flutter whenever he drew near. She saw her young doctor's newly awakened interest in her girl, and a wild hope sprang up so mightily within her that it sent the blood tingling to her cheeks and made her

close her eyes for the very joy of it. The young gentleman got but scant encouragement. The young lady's prejudice still lingered, and she still resented his presence there. She was repellant. When she did address him she made his name "Torrents," and once or twice was so near being actually rude that Mr. Camelford opened his grand eyes in mute astonishment. "Why, she actually jumped over the net the other day when the Burgoynes were here!" he said to Miss Nancy in a horrified undertone.

This afternoon, by way perhaps of showing Aunt Nan the real state of her feelings and how little she cared for these strangers, she was unusually cranky, and so aggravatingly contradictory to everything Harry said about tennis that the young gentleman promptly challenged her. She could not get out of it.

"Never mind," thought she as she took up her racket, "I can beat him easily, and beat him I will for laying down the law like that!"

She was a good player, and what prettier sight is there than to see a graceful girl play tennis well? No doubt it must have been a very beautiful and exhilarating sight to see the Greek maidens throw the ball so deftly, but I don't believe that Miss Nausicaa could for a moment be compared to Miss Kate Falshawe. She was as active as a roe, played with cunning, strength, and seldom made a fault. Harry was better across country than on the tennis-lawn. She could have given him a couple of bisques and beaten him. Somehow or other, though, she was not playing well, and the luck was dead against her. She slipped and stumbled because her pride had forbidden her to put on her tennis-shoes;

her famous cuts were all just too low, and the abominable sun shone in her eyes and never in his, so it ended by his winning the odd game.

"We could beat any two in the county, Miss Falshawe," he said to her.

"We are not likely to play such a match as that, Dr. Torrance," she replied brusquely.

"Why not? Why should we be enemies?"

"I am sure I don't know. I suppose you do."

"Indeed I don't! It seems a most unnatural and unrighteous idea. I am very glad I *don't* know, Miss Falshawe!"

"At all events it is a curious thing your coming here, Dr. Torrance."

"Curious I should wish to see Champfleury?"

"Ah! perhaps it is natural you should

wish to see the place that ought to be yours."

"I should like to see Champfleury," he went on, not heeding this little bit of rudeness, "and I should particularly like to see Mrs. Falshawe, if it was only to assure her I am not a skulking enemy."

"I am afraid we have been a little remiss both to you and Lord Chomleigh," she said, shamed by this honest burst into a slight show of civility: "but my mother is not well. To tell the truth, Dr. Torrance, she is surprised at your being here."

"I don't wonder at it!" said he. "Thinks we have come for some other sport besides shooting, perhaps? But you won't think so badly of us as that, Miss Falshawe? Give dogs bad names you know and there is an end to 'em. I don't want to be put an end to in this fashion if I can help it. Will she see me if I call?"

"I don't know! I'll tell her what you have said."

"Then I shall call on the chance!" he said briskly.

And this is how the two conspirators commenced carrying out their counterplot.

CHAPTER VI.

RAT-HUNTING.

Mr. Pinnock did not let the Champfleury business drop.

It was a job that suited him exactly; he had plenty of leisure time; there was just a touch of the sporting element about it; and to have the handling of any inquiry relating to the Falshawes gratified him in more ways than one. He would have been pleased enough to grub up something against Mrs.

Falshawe; yet withal he was not a bad-hearted man—a staunch friend or a dangerous enemy.

Rub him the wrong way, and he would make things as uncomfortable as he could for you. Flatter his little weaknesses, and, right or wrong, he would stick to you through thick and thin. He would have liked to clear off old scores with Mrs. Falshawe, and to show King Cam that he did know a thing or two about Champfleury; but better still would he have liked to do a good turn for Miss Nancy Stocker.

Mr. Davis, the old clerk, who now represented "Pinnock and Davis," solicitors, was a mild, short-sighted old gentleman, with a large family. His slow impressive manner had stood him in good stead, but Mr. Pinnock found it rather trying to be forced to listen while the worn-out story of the two wills was drawled out to him. He had to

submit, though, and was presently rewarded by a furrage through old papers and letter-books. They were fortunate enough to find some Falshawe correspondence, amongst which were two letters from needy Dick.

In the first he wished to borrow money on the chance of his succession to Champfleury, and on the back of it was the outline of the elder Pinnock's answer, to the effect that madam had signified her decided intention to him of leaving the estate to her son Henry—in fact, that the other was only a bogey will.

The next letter, dated about the time of madam's return from London, contained another application for a loan, but ended with a P.S. saying, *he had "a sure way of making it all right with the old lady."*

It was somewhat curious and ominous that these two letters should have been tied together and preserved, and, though they

were of no more legal value than Mr. Pinnock's own shirt-collar, they would serve a purpose. They would establish a scare, and, maybe, enable him to score one against Mrs. Falshawe. So, docketing them and pocketing them as carefully as though they contained evidence enough to turn her out of Champfleury, he went on to London and lost no time in paying his shilling for a peep at the will.

Miss Nancy's signature as a witness fairly staggered him. He could not take his eyes off it. There it was though, staring at him in her big round hand, "Nancy Stocker, spinster."

Now why hadn't she told him about this when they had spoken so often about Mrs. Falshawe and Champfleury? Never once had she mentioned it though they had referred to the wills times without number. Why did she want to keep it dark? What

was there to hide? Now he remembered it, she said "Please don't" when he offered to make these inquiries. She was in evident distress.

Queer! uncommonly queer!! so queer that lawyer Pinnock went back to his hotel, lit a cigar, and had a good think over it.

It was through Miss Nancy Stocker that Mrs. Falshawe, then Marian Rowan, first came as companion to Madam Torrance at Champfleury. So Miss Nancy was her friend before she was married—that was clear enough.

Miss Nancy, too, was with blind old madam in London when the two wills used to be kept under her pillow. What more likely than that they were changed? Marian would naturally tell her friend she was going to marry Falshawe—they were as poor as church mice—so the deed was done in pure friendship. It was plucky! It was

beautiful! Plain as a pikestaff! Just one friend helping another!

So elated was he with the discovery that he forthwith sent for a Hansom, and started to interview old Paul Torrance, at Dean House, Brixton.

Not for one moment to compromise Miss Nancy! He would not do that to save his life! Why, this hanky-panky about the wills was but another proof of her pluck. No, he was not going to say one word about her. What he intended to do was to draw the old man of what had actually occurred at Champfleury during his brother's stay there with the Falshawes, for this was a part of the story that Miss Nancy Stocker ought now to know for her own protection.

When he pulled up at the house, though, its isolated appearance inside four high walls rather disturbed him. He was not reassured either when the outer gate was

opened by a pale black-haired man, with a book sticking out of his pocket.

A private lunatic asylum! And so strong and overpowering grew this idea while his card was being delivered that he experienced a sudden reaction. Waiting there, too, in the broiling sun was intolerable. He could neither hear nor see anybody. His heart sank within him, and at last he abruptly told the cabman to drive back to the hotel. He would write, he thought to himself as he drove off, and a letter would soon show if the man was daft or not. He wrote at once. He was the son of Madam Torrance's lawyer, he said; would be in town for a fortnight, and glad to have a chat with Mr. Paul Torrance to see whether he could be of any service to his nephew while he was at Flowton.

He thought the old man would rise at this skilfully-thrown fly—but he didn't!

"Mr. Paul Torrance was too much of an invalid to receive strange visitors; but he would be glad to read anything Mr. Pinnock had to say if he would favour him with a letter."

Hereupon the lawyer wrote off, saying that his father had acted for the Falshawes as well as for Madam Torrance; but as the Falshawes had behaved shabbily to them he would be glad to have a little chat with him about Champfleury, and to show him two letters of Richard Falshawe's which had lately come into his hands.

A prompt answer came to this—short and not over sweet:—

"Sir,

I do not wish to discuss Champfleury with you. The letters of the late Richard Falshawe should be delivered to Messrs. Masterman's, of Lincoln's Inn. 'If we use every man according to his deserts who shall escape a whipping?'—*Shakespeare.* Yours obediently,

"Paul Torrance."

The lawyer was not very thin-skinned; but this pithy little note brought an uncomfortable colour to his cheek.

"Mad as a March 'are!" he said angrily to himself as he tore it up. However, it did not much matter. His fortnight had not been spent in vain; he had done his own business and had ferreted out something for Miss Nancy Stocker. So when he took his seat in the Winford railway-carriage he slapped the pocket of his brand-new check-coat, wherein lay Mr. Dick Falshawe's two letters, and rejoiced to think what sport they would afford him.

Once snug at home though he could not for the life of him make up his mind how, when, or where to begin. Now he was near Miss Nancy he did not care to tackle her about those wills. And somehow or other a creepy shame about these two boguy letters got hold upon him.

Perhaps old Paul's sly hit had something to do with it; at all events he shirked action, and by way of gaining time summoned his friend and ally young Tom Ford, and got out from him the last few weeks' chronicle of news.

He heard how there had been high jinks up at The Laurels ever since Lord Chomleigh's arrival; how the young doctor had beaten Kate Falshawe at tennis, and how Lord Chomleigh had three horses and ever so many dogs at the White Hart. Poor Miss Nancy had been ill ever since he left, but she had got him that berth in Ceylon, and was going to pay for his passage and for his kit. She was a brick! Finally, he hoped Mr. Pinnock would not forget to have that rat-hunt before he sailed; if he did, he believed Lord Chomleigh would like to come. "Say that again, Tom!" said the lawyer, pricking up his ears.

"I'm sure he'd come!" said Tom, decisively.

"What makes you think so?"

"Because he's one of the right sort!" cried Tom enthusiastically. "Why, he's got three or four terrier-pups, regular beauties! He'd have given me some rabbit-shooting in the winter."

"Well, Tom!" said Mr. Pinnock, affectionately, "we'll have this rat-hunt directly; and look here, my boy, if Lord Chomleigh *does* come I'll give you a double-barrel central-fire to take with you! there!"

This was just the sort of spur Mr. Pinnock wanted—it set him to work at once. First of all he clapped the letters in his pocket and went up the hill to make a formal call on the young men.

Lord Chomleigh was in, and agreed at once to go to the rat-hunt. Best sport out! Beat deer-stalking hollow. Oh yes! he'd

come any day, and bring the Kingstoke pups with him.

Elated with his success the lawyer next proceeded towards Miss Stocker's, by way of the High Street, where he knew he was pretty sure to run against Mr. Camelford. He made the cast, too, with sportsman-like precision, for no sooner had he come in sight of the shops than there was his grand friend, sailing into Jannett's the pastry-cook.

Mr. Pinnock followed, and, giving him a familiar nod, said to Jannett across the counter, "I want you to send me a nice little lunch down to my farm on Friday, something dainty—let me see now, clear soup, pigeon-pie, and some sweets. That will do, with a cold roast, Mr. Camelford, eh?"

"Going to entertain your Winford friends, Mr. Pinnock?"

"Not quite: Going to have a little rat-hunting. Don't know if you care for the sport?"

"Sport!"

"That's what we call it; anyway, your friend Lord Chomleigh thinks something of it—he is coming."

"Indeed! wants to try his dogs I suppose. I hope you'll enjoy yourselves," and Mr. Camelford beat a hasty retreat.

Mr. Pinnock was up with him though before he had got many paces.

"You had many a rat-hunt in the old days with your friend Falshawe I'll be bound," he said.

"I never heard of any rat-hunting at Champfleury, Mr. Pinnock, and my memory is pretty good."

"By all accounts though Dick Falshawe was fond of all sorts of sport, and didn't

much care what it was," said the lawyer meaningly.

"He seldom spoke ill of his neighbours," Mr. Camelford retorted. "He knew how to behave like a gentleman."

"There are two opinions about that!"

"Quite so! The opinion of those who know and the opinion of those who don't know."

"I expect my father knew a thing or two."

"I suppose he knew his own business, though he appears to have lost the Falshawes'." And with this parting shot Mr. Camelford made for the post-office.

Mr. Pinnock however was the wrong sort of man to let an enemy sheer off in this easy fashion. Mr. Camelford had scored one, now it was his turn, so slapping his pocket he stepped briskly into the post-office, where Miss Brice also carried on a stationery busi-

ness. He wanted a large envelope he said, "one big enough to hold these letters," and thereupon laid Dick's correspondence on the counter in such a way that Mr. Camelford could not fail to see it. Now Dick's handwriting was anything but caligraphy, it was unmistakeably of the pot-hook order and could be read yards off.

Mr. Camelford saw, read, and was amazed.

"You recognise the fist I see," said the lawyer carelessly, putting the letters into the envelope. "Ah! he was a queer fellow, Dick Falshawe."

"Old letters I take it," said Mr. Camelford vaguely alarmed.

"H'sh!" whispered the lawyer with a knowing wink; "if you are going my way we can talk about them."

After a moment's thought Mr. Camelford struck his flag and submitted to be towed off

down the rest of the High Street by his enemy.

"Awkward things old letters sometimes, Camelford—tremendously important too they may be I can tell you; many and many a fortune I have known lost by an old letter. It doesn't matter a straw how old they are as long as they are authentic. These are authentic enough."

"No doubt about that!" said Mr. Camelford.

"It's a funny business altogether!" pursued the lawyer, slipping his arm inside Mr. Camelford's. "How Falshawe got the estate no mortal can tell! and what brings young Torrance here I'd like to know? Queasy queery, Camelford; queasy queery!"

"I tell you what, Mr. Pinnock," said his companion, "I was a friend of Falshawe's, he had no secrets from *me*. Suppose you let me see those letters and we can take counsel about them."

"What? tell you my professional secrets, Camelford; never heard of such a thing! No! no! but I'll be friendly. I have a pretty sharp eye you know, and unless that eye is terribly askew you have been thinking about Mr. Cyril and Champfleury, eh? Oh, I know all about it! but look out! Don't be in a hurry! That is as straight a tip as I can give you."

"I think you should be more explicit, Pinnock."

"Oh! a nod's as good as a wink to any one who knows as much about the Falshawes as you do."

"If I could see those letters," urged Mr. Camelford, "I could help, I'm sure I could! I know all about the estate."

"Upon my word, Camelford," replied the lawyer, putting up at Miss Stocker's door, "I am ashamed of you! Ask a man to tell his professional secrets! that is not in John

Pinnock's line. I'm going in here to have a chat with Miss Nancy; and, mind you, mum's the word about this!" and slapping his pocket once more he tripped up Miss Nancy's front path, in great glee, at the first success of the boguy letters.

He had done well! Hitherto everything on that day had favoured him, but he was not quite so successful with Miss Nancy Stocker.

His courage seemed to have been left in the air when he sat down in one of her low seats, and after ten minutes' chatter, about the rat-hunt and other irrelevant matters, he began to wish himself fifty miles away, anywhere out of the focus of that bright pair of eyes on the sofa.

She was not going to let him shirk it though, for his prying excursion had been on her mind for some time. He had something to say, too, from his evident reluctance to speak.

"I want to hear about your other sort of rat-hunting," she said quietly. "What have you heard about Champfleury?"

"Champfleury? Oh, nothing particular! It will keep, Miss Nancy; it will keep."

"I don't like things kept in pickle too long, Mr. Pinnock; it makes them indigestible."

"Upon my word!" he said, fidgeting with his hat, "I've precious little to tell you. I went out to Brixton to see old Paul, and I give you my word Dean House is nothing more nor less than a private lunatic asylum. The pale fellow that opened the gate gave me such a turn that I bolted. But, mind you! if I had gone in, not a word would the old chap have got out of me about the wills! I wouldn't have mentioned your name, Miss Nancy, from first to last!"

"Very ungallant of you!"

"Oh, Miss Nancy!" he cried, "I may as well tell you at once. *I have seen the will!*"

"Anybody can do that for a shilling."

The lawyer looked at her admiringly, then, after a pause, said heartily, "Well, you are a plucky one, and no mistake! But mum's the word with me. Never fear!"

"Then you have got nothing from your hunt after all?"

"Oh yes, I have! I have found a couple of Richard Falshawe's letters. They have important reference to the Champfleury business. I'm not quite sure what I shall do with them."

"Send them to Mrs. Falshawe, of course! What else?"

"No no! not I! She behaved badly to me, and I intend to have it out with her, sooner or later."

"Black mail, Mr. Pinnock! You've been rat-hunting with a vengeance!"

"Come, come, Miss Nancy, don't you be so down on me! Remember how badly she has behaved to me and mine. Wouldn't give me a bit of shooting. Wouldn't do the civil in any blessed way. Now it's my turn."

"You're a shabby fellow then! That's all I can say!"

"Easy, now! easy! You've a sharp tongue and a soft heart. More 'oney than sting. I know you; but business is business. I'd never harm *you*—never. I tell you what—I'll show you the letters! there!"

"You'll do nothing of the kind, Mr. Pinnock! I won't look at them. Give them back to the rightful owner, like a gentleman."

"Gentleman! Ha! ha! They haven't treated me much like a gentleman! I don't

want to do anything shabby. Any way I'll stick by you!"

"A man who is not true to himself is true to nobody, Mr. Pinnock."

"Well! come now! Let me read these letters to you, and you shall settle it! We must think of Miss Kate, you know," he added cunningly.

"Put them back, Mr. Pinnock; put them back! I'm ashamed of you for supposing I would listen to them. Why, if Kate was here, I believe she'd slap your face!"

"As you please! as you please!" he said, getting up, and re-pocketing the letters in considerable confusion. I—I beg your pardon! but don't be hard on me! And mind!" he whispered, turning round at the door, "whatever comes I'll stick to you through thick and thin! and, if ever you get into

trouble about this hanky-panky, just send for John Pinnock."

And John Pinnock made good his retreat, leaving Miss Nancy Stocker uncomfortably perturbed.

What disturbed her most was the thought that this ferreting lawyer might upset the hopeful little idyll that was going on up at The Laurels. He was not a bad-hearted man, but a man with a grievance is always dangerous, especially if the grievance is one that touches his vanity. A lawyer, too, not over well disposed towards you, with a couple of compromising letters in his pocket, is not to be held lightly. Mrs. Falshawe must be made to tickle his vanity and disarm his chronic resentment by a little judicious civility. Above all, they must combine to prevent his doing anything that would interfere with this growing intimacy between the young people.

What were in those letters he carried in

his pocket? She was greatly incensed with him for daring to suppose, for one moment, that she would read them. If he attempted it again she would tear them up and throw them in his face!

For all this righteous anger, though, Miss Nancy would dearly have liked to know what was in them.

And Mr. Pinnock heartily wished she *had*. He got home abashed, angry, and crest-fallen. His victory with Mr. Camelford had been clean wiped out by his defeat with Miss Nancy. If he could only have got her to read or to listen to those letters they would have been in the same box. They would have waxed confidential. She would have been the mediator between him and Mrs. Falshawe, and it might have ended in his magnanimously giving them up.

Instead of all this he had been called a shabby fellow, and he felt very shabby

indeed. The more he thought of it the angrier he grew. The letters burned in his pocket! So feverish and fidgety did he get over it at last that he threw them into his desk, put on his thick boots, and trudged off to his farm to tell his people to prepare for the rat-hunt.

CHAPTER VII.

LADY CHOMLEIGH.

Lord Chomleigh did not take away a very pleasant remembrance of Mr. Pinnock's rat-hunt. Not that the day was not all that could be desired, for the weather was superb, Mr. Jannett's lunch excellent, and the rat's stronghold in the barn was attacked with abundant success.

They fell in hundreds; but one—more malicious than the rest—one, too, having no respect for persons—left the souvenir of a

nip on his lordship's thumb that led to dire results. It was only a scratch, but after a day or two it looked angry and the arm got stiff and painful. "A strain at tennis," he said. Then he had to give up play, though he still went regularly, and distressed Miss Nimbus by his altered looks.

He still managed to write to his mother too, the shaky hand giving a little additional emphasis to his raptures about Kate.

At last his failing appetite and woe-begone appearance roused the doctor's suspicions—the arm was examined, the tell-tale chain of red spots discovered, and five minutes later the giant was in bed, where his finger was probed and lanced and he was made remarkably angry and uncomfortable.

Of course Torrance wrote off to Kingstoke—so did Miss Nancy—and her ladyship was very much put out thereby. Not about the rat. No rat could hurt Charley—but this

sudden illness taken in conjunction with his late letters was suspicious.

Half-a-dozen angels before had had the same endearing epithets applied to them, but he had never sickened over one till now.

Next afternoon her post-horses clattered up Flowton Hill with much noise and bustle, and deposited her with her maid Josephine at Miss Nancy Stocker's gate.

She came in rather inopportunely, parlour-maid Jessie being at that very moment engaged under her mistress's supervision in patching up, mending, and re-buttoning young Master Mundy's tattered clothes (an operation often undertaken suddenly upon some ragged mudlark who happened to be caught passing her gate).

"You are going to stay, Conny?" Miss Nancy asked, after the boy had been dismissed with an admonition and a hunch of cake.

"Can you take us in?"

"Yes, if you can put up with the same wee rooms."

"Thanks; now tell me about Charley."

"Better—much better! The doctor says it was blood-poisoning."

"My dear Nancy, pray open that window! wide! wider still! Who can tell what your buttonless boy may have brought with him! This sort of horror always comes from the poor. One of these days you'll get something more in your house than you bargained for, from coddling these dirty brats. Are you sure it was blood-poisoning?"

"So Harry Torrance says. His finger has been lanced and he is ever so much better."

"Nothing infectious, Nancy?"

"No, no! Nothing! Don't be alarmed."

"But blood-poisoning! simply awful! I really think it would be safest to send

Josephine up with a little note directly and ask the doctor. Let him come and see me. You know my horror of these things. A scrap of paper? Thanks."

And after the note was written and dispatched, with the strict injunction that Josephine was on no account whatever to go inside the doctor's house, her ladyship settled down for a cup of tea and one of her chats.

Now these chats, turning as they did on the one subject Miss Stocker disliked to discuss, were anything but agreeable; so the moment Champfleury was mentioned she said sharply, "Not a word about the Falshawes, if you please, Conny. I've had enough of that."

"Indeed, so have I," she giggled; "but I am human, Nan, say what you like—my blood freezes when I think of my poor dear martyred Henry. I don't want to speak

of that woman, but you positively must tell me about her daughter. No doubt she is charming?"

"Never a word from me, Conny. Once bitten twice shy."

"Well, dear, I only hope and pray your young friend has not been led away by his nonsense."

"Not likely!"

"That's right. She is a sensible girl or you would not have taken to her. Where did he meet her? Here?"

"No, at the Camelfords; and by-the-bye, Conny, I am going to dine there this evening. Will you come, or will you have dinner here?"

"Will *she* be there?"

"No, but Cyril Camelford will."

"Cyril Camelford! you don't say so! Is *he* a relation. My dear, I am dying to meet him. He is all the rage: and you see what

with this cough and these horrid specks I've been nowhere lately. Oh, don't look at me! There was Lady Bulstrode the other day—you know the odious woman with the grating voice and vermilion cheeks. She goes to Eauxbonnes every year—well, she actually grinned when I asked her about it. I'm certain she noticed my cheek; but never mind, I'll go and meet Cyril Camelford if I find Charley pretty well."

She did find him pretty well. Harry had come down in person to assure her there was no fear of infection, and had to stand a smart cross-examination before she was convinced.

Had he a rash on him? Was there any risk in touching him? If there was she would not go, and she was quite sure Charley would not wish her to go! "I am dreadfully nervous about these matters," she said.

Harry assured her there was not the slightest risk.

"I'm relieved to hear it," she replied; "but I'm a fool about this—simply a fool! Why, the first time I ever met Lady Bulstrode I actually ran away from the house! I thought the woman had scarlet fever! It was a great joke against me at the time. I think I must be preternaturally sensitive!"

"Then your ladyship should certainly not stay long in the sick room!" said Harry promptly, "and pray don't excite him."

So, in consequence of this judicious advice, Lord Chomleigh had but one short half-hour's maternal commiseration, and to his relief scarce a word about Miss Kate Falshawe. "What is the meaning of this?" thought he, suspiciously. "Is she going to take advantage of my being on my back to go up the hill and have a row with Mrs. Falshawe? This would make a nice kettle-

of-fish, and no mistake! He must say something before she left, *to stop that* ——"

"No wonder he feels awkward about it," thought she, as he made one or two stupid attempts.

At last when she got up to say good-bye, and was screwing up her courage to give him another kiss, he took her hand solemnly, heaved a prodigious sigh, and murmured "Kate!"

"Foolish boy!" said she.

"When you know her, mum," he went on, "you will like her awfully. She is just the one to take your heart. Clever, and as plucky as a lion!"

"By-and-bye, dear boy! By-and-bye!"

"Of course I mean by-and-bye, mum! That is just what I was going to tell you. Look here! Don't say a word about it to anybody. *Don't tell a soul! I haven't said a word—not a word!*"

"Not to her?"

"No, no! Certainly not!" he said eagerly. "A serious step, you know!" And he frowned and blinked, and winked and shook his head so solemnly that her ladyship's heart was lightened.

"Well, well, dear boy!" she said, giving the kiss with a real smack, "don't be too precipitate in that quarter till I return. Promise me this."

"I promise you faithfully!" he cried, jumping up in his bed, "and let me give you a cheque, mum. You'll be put to no end of expense travelling. Come in to-morrow and say good-bye."

She was greatly elated. It was just the old old story, and he was cooling off already. *He did not want the affair mentioned.* This was just as it should be. So she said never a word to Miss Nancy about that part of her

interview, and went off to Mrs. Camelford's party in high spirits.

She always kept her eyes and ears open at Flowton, feeling it a bounden duty to collect and take back every scrap of news she could gather about the village and Champfleury, wherewith to feast and regale the old cripple at Brixton.

This evening, encouraged by her son's words, she gave herself out for conquest and succeeded admirably. She plunged at once into a literary palaver with Cyril, and, though she did not know the name of his book, discussed its merits with great vivacity. She floundered on in the happiest confusion, picking herself up if she made a blunder, and rattling on again with a laugh.

"Of course I forget," she giggled, "but you know the world is the woman's book! Oh, you don't believe in Rochefoucauld? Then you're a regular Acrostic."

Then when Cyril, without moving a muscle of his face, gravely defended Agnosticism as the highest form of belief, since it denied explanations of divine mysteries, she quickly appealed to the Rector to know if this was orthodox, and in the middle of the worn-out rectorial address about Faith and Reason dinner was announced, and they filed in in the best of good tempers.

She was on the alert. Nothing escaped her. She saw Rosie's dimpled face brighten as she sat next to the young doctor, and mentally put it down as a case, little dreaming that the light came to those eyes and the colour to those cheeks because of the good news about Geraint. She noted Cyril's tranquil devotion to Vi; but what she wanted to hear about was Champfleury.

Before dinner was over she had mentally settled how to manage this. Mr. Camelford was the man! His mind was so eminently

parochial, and he was so brimfull of self-importance, that he would be able to supply her with full minutiæ of the Flowton and Champfleury proceedings both for the present and for the future.

So after they had returned to the drawing-room, and she had listened to one of Cyril's songs, sung in a minor key by Miss Violet, and then to the famous duet, which made her tremble for her tympanum, she cleverly handed the Rector over to Miss Stocker, and made room for Mr. Camelford by her side.

His voice, she declared, was like Foli's, but he must have been told that dozens of times, for the timbre was distinctly the same. Then she gradually got personal enough to say gracefully, that, though they had never met before, yet she had heard so much about him that she could not treat him as a stranger.

"Besides," she added, pointing to Cyril and Rosie, "I take a keen interest in your village now."

"We might call it a re-awakened interest, Lady Chomleigh," said he; "we can remember when that young man's father was staying at Champfleury with your husband. The friendship between a Chomleigh and a Torrance is repeated in the sons."

"Demon and Pythagoras over again!" her ladyship murmured sweetly.

"Exactly! I knew Torrance, Lady Chomleigh, not so well as Falshawe, who was my most particular friend, but still I knew him, A perfect gentleman!"

"Yes! poor dear!" sighed Lady Conny.

"I need not tell you," pursued Mr. Camelford, "that the arrival of these two young men here woke us all up! There is something romantic in it to those who know local history. No one will feel this more than your ladyship."

"Yes, indeed!" she sighed again.

"I never could quite make out, Lady Chomleigh, how it was that poor Torrance made such a mess of it. It was terribly sad!"

"Sad is no name for it!" she replied. "It was cruel! it was mysterious! We scarcely like to speak about it."

"And people have plenty to say here. I assure you I am obliged to take the high ground with the tittle-tattle that is flying about at times."

"You don't say so!"

"Indeed I have! There is one highly objectionable person here, a retired attorney, he never lets Champfleury drop. He calls it 'Queasy queery.'"

"Dear me! how very very clever. Oh! Mr. Camelford! why didn't you ask Mr. Queasy Queery to dinner?"

"Well, I don't think he is exactly the sort of person your ladyship would care to meet."

"But I adore queasy queery people! and depend upon it he is right about Champfleury."

"And you really think there was—well, a brush at Champfleury?"

"Of course there was! And there is only one person who could tell us the rights of it."

"Indeed!"

"*Mrs. Falshawe!* Oh dear! Now I have put my foot in it! You such a friend, too. Just like me!"

"Don't alarm yourself, Lady Chomleigh, I was her husband's friend; but she has held so persistently aloof from all my sympathy and advice that I may say I know but very little of her."

"I'm very glad to hear it, Mr. Camelford. The worst of me is, if I have anything on my mind out it comes—plump. What I have said though is quite true."

"I don't doubt it!"

"You say she holds herself aloof—ha ha!

perhaps she has cause! Depend upon it she could tell us something if she dared! 'Il y anguille sur la roche,' Mr. Camelford, and one of these days it will wriggle out. You see poor Henry Torrance, that young man's father, was such a dear dear friend of mine that I cannot help taking an interest in Champfleury. Why, the place might have been mine instead of Kingstoke! Good gracious! What am I saying!" and up went her fan.

Mr. Camelford's heart gave a great leap at this show of confidence. "You may say what you please before me with perfect safety, Lady Chomleigh" he said. "Besides, ahem, I too have an interest in Champfleury."

"Indeed!"

It is extraordinary what varied expressions can be put into this simple word, and there was an intonation about it as it left her

ladyship's mouth that made Mr. Camelford pause instinctively. Such an excellent and comforting opinion had he of himself, however, that he could only hear in it a sympathetic interest in his own affairs. Why should she not help him in his design upon Champfleury?

With her help he would not care a button for Miss Nancy Stocker's opposition. He had already begun to look upon Mr. Pinnock's brag about the two letters as a scare. It would take a deal more than that to put him off. Lady Chomleigh would be such a powerful ally that he would snap his fingers at both of them.

"You say you have an interest in Champfleury, Mr. Camelford?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied in a low tone, "I have a tender interest in Champfleury notwithstanding Mrs. Falshawe's ungracious behaviour. I cannot forget old friendships

whatever she might do, and I am naturally interested in my old friend's daughter."

"Oh! by-the-bye there is a daughter?" she asked innocently.

"Yes, there is a daughter, the heiress of Champfleury. A charming person, but—well, unformed. She is in the closest possible friendship with our friend Miss Nancy Stocker."

"To be sure!" said she; "I remember Paul Torrance speaking of a daughter—Kate is her name, I think?"

"Yes! Kate Falshawe, a very popular young lady, a favourite with all. Cyril is greatly interested in her."

"Ah! a *tendresse?*"

"Well, I hope so, I trust so. To have awakened even an interest in such a man is something, Lady Chomleigh."

"Quite so! Pray go on! I am all ears."

Thus encouraged Mr. Camelford proceeded

"Who is there that knew Champfleury of old—with its gaiety, its stables full of horses during the hunting-season, and its unique position in the county—that does not grieve to see it with closed doors, so to speak, and without a fitting representative? Now, if my hopes are fulfilled it would take its old lead, and have a fitting master. The Camelfords have a name, Lady Chomleigh. The Martin Camelford spoken of as being so much with the Prince last century was an ancestor of mine. Then Cyril has a name of his own. It really seems ordained."

"Upon my word, Mr. Camelford, you are a most wonderful person—practical and romantic all at once. But are you sure about your nephew? I am wretchedly short-sighted, but it seems to me that he has an attraction nearer home. Look at him. Your charming Violet and he understand each other."

"Not in the way you hint. She can

sympathise with him in his aspirations, she can stimulate him to higher flights. That is all!"

"How dreadfully clever you all are to be sure! You have interested me immensely about Champfleury, Mr. Camelford. Poor dear old Paul Torrance will be even more interested than I am."

'Not a word, Lady Chomleigh, just yet. Not a word. What I have said is in the strictest confidence."

"I'm a fellow-conspirator, then! Well, never mind; but you must keep me posted up about it. Paul Torrance is so delighted for a scrap of news. One thing bothers him—he can never make out how old Miss Kate is."

"I'll tell you!" said he promptly. "She was born in France. She must be nineteen."

"That is what is generally supposed; but

the old gentleman cannot get any evidence to support it. Funny! isn't it?"

"There would be no difficulty in finding all that."

"Not to you! you will see to it, of course. And I hope you will come to Kingstoke by-and-bye, Mr. Camelford, and pay me a visit. You can tell me all about it then. I think it a charming arrangement for Cyril."

Never had Lady Constance made a more successful appearance than on that evening at The Laurels. Mr. Camelford was not the only recipient of her graciousness. Mrs. Camelford's heart was touched by the kiss and the happy word given to each of her girls at parting. She threw Cyril a *bon-bon*, in the shape of an invitation to Kingstoke, and even disarmed the Rector's opinion of her frivolity by the promise of a subscription to the new reading-room.

She was supremely silly, but clever

enough to know that in this very silliness lay her strength. In it her friends recognised all the charm of *naïveté*, and it disarmed her enemies by a mute appeal to their superior wisdom. There was such a captivating jingle of outspokenness and mendacity, of graceful, airy, piquant touches and downright slander, that it was impossible to quarrel with her; and if you did attempt it you were annihilated and shamed by a burst of rippling laughter that carried you away and left you stranded somewhere, looking very small indeed.

As they drove home she told Miss Nancy all that had passed between her and Mr. Camelford, with childlike candour and simplicity. She acted the scene, too, with such genuine humour, and simulated their host's mode of speech with such comical truth, that Miss Nancy laughed in spite of her annoyance at not being able to recipro-

cate her lively cousin's candour. She could not tell her the real state of affairs at Flowton. She could only sit there and listen while Lady Conny growled out Mr. Camelford's whispered confidences. Her ladyship even wanted her to join in "The Manly Heart," just to show how splendidly she could roll out those two bass notes. There was no holding her. She was brimming over with delight at her success.

"Though one sometimes says more than one means, Nan," she said on going to bed, "it is better than saying nothing at all and letting people think you are sly. Now, for the life of me I can't help saying just what comes uppermost! Didn't I tell young Torrance what a fool I was about infection? I always plop it out, dear, and, funny enough, have made no enemies. Camelford thinks with me things are queer at Champfleury, and I believe Charley will get over his Kate

attack like he has the rest. Good night, dear."

She was buoyant and fresh the next morning—Flowton air she said.

She tripped up to The Laurels to make her adieux, and told Mr. Camelford again that she thought the Champfleury alliance would suit Cyril admirably. He must persevere; and he must keep her posted up in the news, and he must come to Kingstoke. Then she went across to bid good-bye to her son—was glad to notice that he never even mentioned Kate's name—and finally drove triumphantly out of the town with his cheque in her pocket.

CHAPTER VIII.

KATE FALSHAWE.

KATE FALSHAWE was about as nice a girl as you would meet in a day's march. The Champfleury breezes had blown health and vigour into her body and mind, and if she sometimes ruffled you by plain speaking, or shocked your superfine nerves by jumping ditches, it did you no more harm than did the invigorating puffs of wind that sometimes slapped your face on the Moss. She

was by no means a perfect young lady or a pattern daughter, though. Indeed had it not been for Aunt Nan's judicious ministration I am afraid she would have been a very disagreeable, ignorant young person. But Miss Nancy had never lost her hold on the girl since first she took her to school; and Kate, though the most wayward of wayward pupils, took to her books in a sober, orthodox fashion. She not only knew nearly as much as most Girton girls, but could have beaten any one of them at French, German, or Italian, by reason of the opportunities she had had during their little trips abroad.

She loved her mother—was proud of her stately presence and her kindly dealings with her dependants; yet for all that chafed like a thrush in a cage at being perpetually confronted with this mysterious moping and fretting.

At times she was only kept from open rebellion by a little judicious bullying from Aunt Nan.

Of course she hated all Torrances. They were natural enemies. And the mysterious arrival of this young doctor, taken in conjunction with her mother's obstinate reticence as to what was troubling her, was enough to try the temper of any high-spirited girl.

"I'm not a school-girl!" she would say, angrily, to Miss Nancy.

And Miss Nancy would then clap on her aspiring bonnet, and proceed to attack the mother. Not a bit of use! 'Tis true she was shamed into receiving these agreeable young men once, and for once only. There was no cordiality.

"Best not be too intimate," she said suspiciously to Miss Stocker, and then relapsed into that exasperating silence and passive

resistance which had so often driven the little lady to the verge of desperation.

Then a change began to creep over Miss Kate. Hitherto wandering fancy-free in the Champfleury woods, she had never thought about finding out for herself about the grinding trouble;—now she began to put two and two together. If the cause was a Torrance, why here it was at their very door, embodied in the shape of a good-looking young fellow with "a sort of a manner" about him, as Lady Chomleigh had observed.

Here it was at hand ready to be grappled with, and grapple with it she would. He seemed anything but an enemy—on the contrary, there was no mistaking his wish to be uncommonly friendly. What did this mean? What brought him here?

A mystery! and, being a mystery, Kate like other ladies, from Eve down to Lady

Bluebeard, at once wanted the key. It would not be over pleasant to have to plump out, "I've been rude; but I want to know what brought you here."

She would face this though, for she was already assured that if she did ask a straightforward question she would get a straightforward answer. What she did not quite relish was the self-inquiry as to how much this sudden resolution of hers to find out what she could for herself was due to *him;* for she remembered, with just a tiny touch of shame, that he had influenced her in a dozen little ways that she did not care to recall. Why, there were the books he had spoken of on her book-shelf, and the songs he sang on her piano!

Since she had known him the unnatural restraint of Champfleury became daily more irksome. She had been stupidly idle. She longed for a larger and a freer life. She

wanted to be up and doing, and forthwith determined upon finding out the cause of their trouble; up to the present time she had avoided anything like a *tête-à-tête* with Harry, and, though ever since their game of tennis he had been guilty of many commonplace devices in order to obtain Miss Falshawe's ear, certain prudential motives induced the young lady to be wary enough not to be caught.

But Harry was good at a waiting race. A practical philosopher, who could have propounded a theory and written a treatise on "the looking at the bright side of things," and he persistently looked on this side to the total occlusion of the other. When he embarked on this philanthropic plot, too, of healing an old feud, he was quite prepared to meet with a check or two, and these enforced pauses in his programme he employed in prospecting the situation, and in

taking an ever-increasing interest in Miss Falshawe. Not, he sagely argued, because he was in love with her, but because he saw she was suffering.

Something was dragging her down. Every day he saw the bright face paling a little, and every day he saw her growing more serious and abstracted. So Dr. Torrance's tender heart was touched, and, as pity is akin to love, it is possible he might have slipped over the flimsy barrier without knowing it.

Chance does favour lovers at times, notwithstanding the old adage — in the most extraordinary ways too. What, for instance, could have been more extraordinarily opportune at this juncture than that young Phil Mundy should tumble out of a tree and break his leg? Wasn't the boy an especial *protégé* of Kate's, and didn't he live up at the Moss, so that the young doctor's visits

took him past her very gates? Never was a limb so bebandaged and besplinted before.

One day he saw Bob the pony hitched on to the cottage door. So what does the young man do but unhitch him and send him scampering down the hill with a cut across his flanks. A mean trick, but it answered the purpose, for Kate was obliged to walk home, and the wily doctor walked by her side.

Now was her time. "It was very good of you to come up to this boy, Dr. Torrance," she began; "perhaps we ought to have sent to Winford for a doctor."

"I can mend a broken leg," said he.

"But you may not like to attend him."

"Why not?" he asked.

"It may not be pleasant considering your connection with the place."

"You must have a poor opinion of me if you think that," said he.

"I can only think how odd it is your being here at all!" she plumped out.

"Haven't I already confessed to idle curiosity?"

"Will you tell me *now* — honestly and frankly—what brought you here?" she asked, stopping suddenly.

"Put a little bravado into the curiosity, Miss Falshawe, and you have the whole truth. But—for goodness sake!" he went on as they resumed their walk,—"don't think for one moment that I covet Champfleury, because I don't. I am glad I came if it is only to tell you this. Why is Mrs. Falshawe so shy of me?"

"Because your uncle is our enemy. I suppose you know all about that."

"Indeed I don't! And, what is more, I don't want to know."

"But you know there is *something?*" Kate persisted.

"Nothing that can have anything to do with us; nothing! What on earth can we have to do with musty grievances except to stamp them out?"

"I hate mysteries!" cried Kate, slashing the hedge with her riding-whip.

"Let us make an end of them then," said he, quickly.

"*That* did not bring you here?" she said, interrogatively.

"No, Miss Falshawe; but it is keeping me. Now the truth is out! I shan't be happy till Mrs. Falshawe and my uncle are friendly. That is what is keeping me."

"And a moment ago you said you did not know what the difference was about."

"And I don't. It doesn't matter one straw; it all comes from the way of putting things. They have been put wrong here, and everybody has been worrying on in the wrong groove. People aren't cranky by

choice; they want lifting into the right groove, that's all. Everybody would be cordial if they could."

"The *if* means a great deal here, Dr. Torrance."

"It means the swallowing of a little personal pique, and the looking at the best side of things; that's all. Come, Miss Kate, you must help me in putting things right."

"I wish I could get at the bottom of it and find out whose fault it is," and Kate gave another slash at the hedge.

"Why fish for faults when there is something brighter to be caught? Why look for faults when we can find blessings?"

"I don't see how I can do one single thing!" she cried. "I wish I did."

"Could you not get your mother to write a friendly note to my uncle? He is half-crazed about Champfleury; but remember, he is a poor cripple who has had nothing

to do but to sit in his wheeled-chair and nurse his grievance. He has a warm heart, and I believe a friendly word would lift him into the right groove. Let us try! Just think what a grand world this would be if everybody tried to make the best of it. We must begin at once!"

Kate rather resented the *we*. The conversation had taken a turn wholly unexpected by her. There was nothing whatever to find fault with though; indeed, his cheerful desire to be acting on their behalf shamed her querulousness.

"I'll do my best," she said, after a pause.

"Then that is a bargain," he said, stopping suddenly and holding out his hand.

She did not see it, or pretended not to. The whole thing had been too quick. They had arrived at the present critical pause by such leaps and bounds, and by such a different road to what she had anticipated,

that she wanted breathing time to collect her thoughts. So, instead of looking at the outstretched hand, the young lady looked carefully away—away over the Champfleury woods to smoky Winford.

It was very still. A hot golden haze made everything blurred and indistinct, but a lazy flock of plovers simultaneously flashing their white breasts in the sun led her eyes into cloudland; and straight into the clear silver cloudland Miss Kate walked, and there remained till called to dull earth again by the pertinacious doctor still holding his hand out and repeating, "That is a bargain then, Miss Falshawe?"

She looked at it askance, and then allowed hers to rest there—only for a moment though. She did not half like it. It almost seemed as if she had gone body and soul over to the enemy.

At all events there had been enough of

confidences for one day. She said no more, and Harry was discreet enough to be content with what he had gained. They parted at the lodge, where Bob was discovered rubbing his nose against the park gates, and the young doctor strode down the hill elate and confident, while Kate crept up the avenue by the pony's side rather dazed at what had passed.

She could scarcely collect her thoughts, so rapid had it all been. One thing, however, was very clear. Her determination of putting an end to the trouble at Champfleury had gained form and solidity. She had found unlooked-for support and encouragement. Henry Torrance was not an enemy. He had proffered his friendship with unmistakeable earnestness. He knew of their trouble, and was anxious to sweep it away. He was true and honest. If her mother would not write to Paul Torrance she would.

She would not waste a moment. So after giving Bob to the groom she marched straight upstairs to her mother's room. She had caught sight of "The White Hart" fly at the door, and knew that Aunt Nan was there.

"You are a fool, Marian!" the little lady was saying as she opened the door; "I've told you so before and I tell you so again. Ah! Come in, Kate; come in! I've been telling your mother she is a fool for not seeing lawyer Pinnock and showing him a little civility. Depend upon it he will make it nasty for her if she doesn't! Oh! I don't mind speaking before Kate, Marian. She is not a child. You have not behaved well to these two young men after all their civility; but you'll find Pinnock made of different stuff! He'll bully you! You are like one of your sick crows on a branch that every boy has a shy at as he passes."

"Kate, dear," said her mother, "had you not better take off your habit?"

But Kate did not heed her. She was bursting with impatience to commence work in her own way. Had he not said "We must begin at once?" So instead of showing her usual filial obedience, to her mother's surprise and consternation she sat down by her side, and taking her hand said, "Mother, you must see Mr. Pinnock and you must write to Paul Torrance."

"Paul Torrance!" her mother gasped. "Paul Torrance! What do you mean, child?"

"Go on, Kate," said Miss Nancy, leaning back in her chair, and folding her arms, and Kate did go on.

"Whatever trouble you have, mother, comes from Paul Torrance. He is our enemy, I know; but he is old—very old. Hold out your hand to him,—write him a

note, and offer to be friends. I am sure he will respond to it."

"How on earth can you know anything about it?" cried her mother all agape.

"I have been talking to Henry Torrance. He is our friend," said Kate with a slight flush.

Mrs. Falshawe looked at her daughter, and Kate bore the gaze with a mixture of confusion and defiance.

Miss Nancy sat rigidly in her chair like a little judge. Nobody spoke, and an awkward pause was broken at last by Kate saying determinedly—

"If you will not write to him, mother, I will. I will go and see him. Anything to put an end to this misery. Why should it go on? An old man must surely wish to be friendly. It shall not go on!" she cried, lashing herself into a little fury. "I say it is degrading for us here at Champfleury to

be thrusting Henry Torrance and Lord Chomleigh from our doors when they proffer their friendship. It is monstrous!"

"How could we be certain of a Torrance?" her mother asked weakly. The fact was she scarcely knew what she said. She was overpowered by Kate's words, but could take in just enough to conjure up an unexpectedly bright ending to their troubles.

"I tell you you can trust him," said the girl all aflame. "He is our friend."

"Give me a minute or two, Katey. Take off your habit and come in again."

"Nancy, dear," she whispered, when Kate had closed the door, "what is the meaning of it? You heard what she said? 'We can trust him.' 'He is our friend.' Did you hear? She harped upon it. Is he—*is he—in love with her?*"

"I shouldn't wonder," said Miss Nancy,

demurely; "such things have happened before in this world."

"Well, it is quite the most blessed thing that ever happened to me. Such a happy, happy ending to all the worry!"

"Will you write the letter?"

"The letter? Oh, yes! Why not? He is old, and will forget and forgive."

"Forget and forgive what?" asked Miss Nancy, sharply. "If it is as easy as all this why didn't you write before?"

"How could I possibly tell that young Torrance was friendly, Nan?" she exclaimed, getting up and walking about excitedly. "How could I tell that he was not a wolf in sheep's clothing? But he *is* friendly—you heard Kate? She harped upon it. I have been mistaken. We must make amends. We must have him here. Lord Chomleigh, too!"

"You've very suddenly become sensible, Marian."

"Better late than never, Nan! We will get up a pic-nic or something. I'll ask Mr. Pinnock, too; that will put him in a good humour. Upon my word, I am completely bewildered by the change things have taken!"

"Don't fidget, Marian, but write the letter."

Thus urged she sat down with business-like alacrity, and dashed off the note.

"Will this do, Nan?"

"DEAR MR. TORRANCE,

"The friendly arrival of your nephew, Henry, makes me hope that our old grudge is at an end. We are both getting old, and I am sure you will feel with me that it is time bygones should be bygones.

"I am,

"Yours in all friendship,

"MARIAN FALSHAWE."

"Of course it will do! Why on earth wasn't it done years and years ago?"

"My dear Nan, don't be foolish! Who could have foreseen all this? Just fancy! If young Torrance is really in love with her, and she ——"

Kate's entrance stopped any further words. The letter was read over to her, and, after being duly sealed, was handed to Aunt Nan to be posted. But Aunt Nan was by no means assured that it would clear off the cloud that hung about Champfleury.

END OF VOL. I.

WESTMINSTER:
PRINTED BY NICHOLS AND SONS,
25, PARLIAMENT STREET.